DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN MAGAZINE

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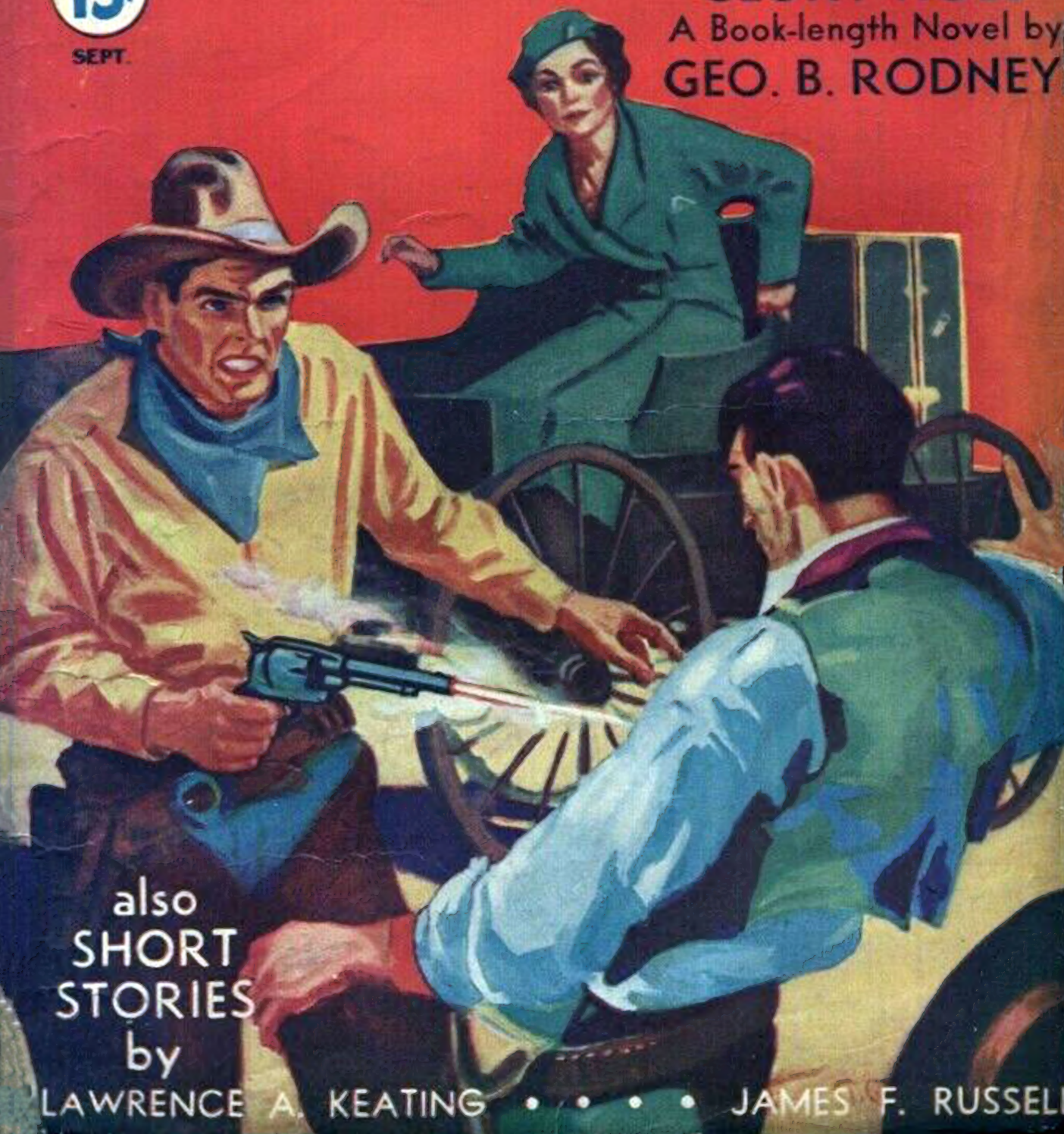
GLORY HOLE
A Book-length Novel by
GEO. B. RODNEY



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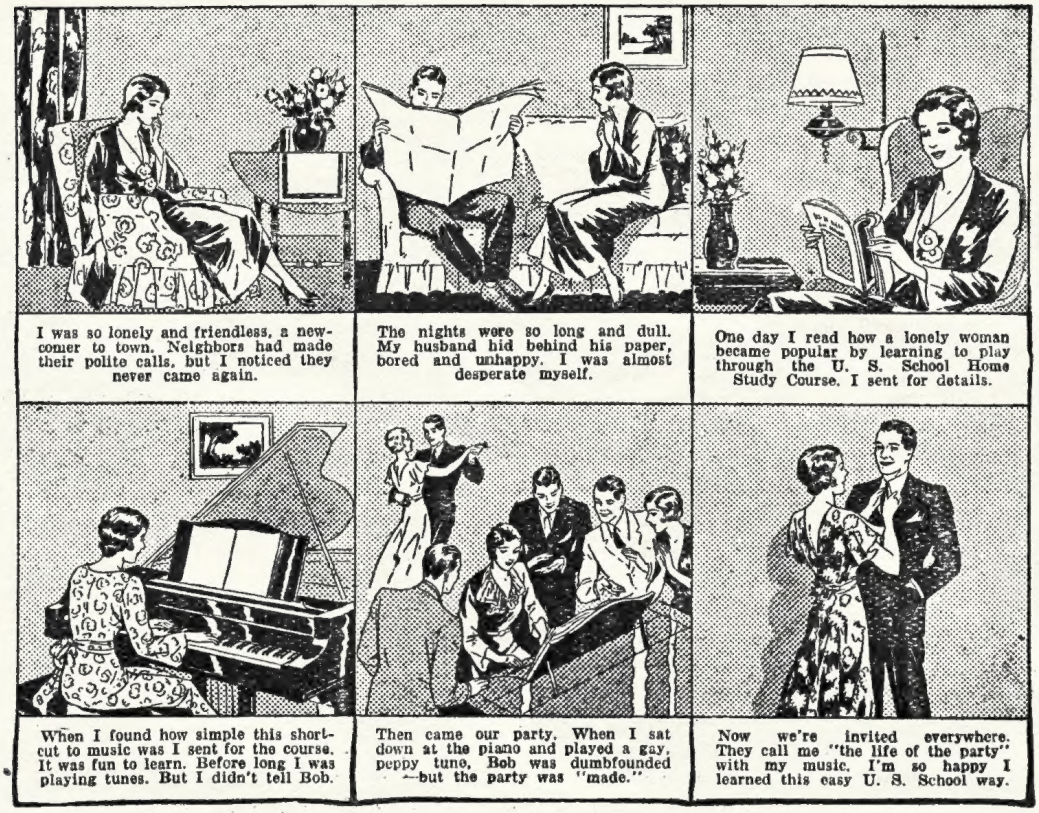

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THE GLORY HOLE

By GEORGE B. RODNEY

CHAPTER I

KYNASTON TAKES STOCK

"HI, Phil! . . . . Kynaston! . . . . Ky—naston!"

Ben Crocker, the big, genial manager of the Cross Bar Ranch, stepped out upon his porch and inflated his lungs for a fresh bellow.

That shout tore the noonday hush and disturbed a man playing solitaire with a pack of soiled cards on a table in the bunkhouse. He stopped midway in a play, swore thoughtfully and played a red jack on a red queen. (The game was black on red.) Then he swore again and rose leisurely amid a gust of jibes.

"Oh you Kynaston," said Ginger Epps

drawlingly. "I'd admire fer you to teach Mister Lorgan to put his chaps on right side first an'—"

"You go to hell, Ginger," said Phil equably. He was tired of his job of riding herd over the guests at the dude ranch. He seized Ginger by the neck and rubbed his nose along the table edge. Then he took his hat and sauntered out of the bunkhouse over to where Crocker was filling his lungs for another shout.

"You lookin' for me, Crock?" demanded Phil.

"Do I *want* you?" Crocker stared at him and Phil stared back and smiled slightly. Crocker had no need to look twice, for Phil Kynaston filled the eye.

A red-and-white checked neckerchief filled the loose collar of his shirt. Blue denim overalls, spotlessly clean, were tucked into beautifully tooled boots of dark leather that carried spurs of fine silver inlay work. The whole outfit showed that Phil was more than merely careful in his dress. Crocker glanced at his face, took in the firm mouth and the eyes that were the abiding place of a silent, quizzical mirth as though he saw something infinitely amusing that all others had missed. But Ben Crocker knew those eyes were deceptive. He had seen them, on occasion, harden like steel dyes.

"Do I want you?" he said again, laughing. "What in hell d'you reckon I was yellin' my lungs out for? Just for fun? What you think I called you for?"

"I thought maybe you were callin' me like you did last night—just to see what I had," said Phil innocently.

"Yeah." Crocker grinned. "I called you an' you had four queens and caught me with my pants down—"

"In the presence of four queens? Be decent, Ben." Then his voice changed. "Those cattle over on the Big Alamo range ought to be dipped, Crock," he said. "They're rotten with ticks. First thing you know you'll be brandin' ticks instead of cows."

"Don't I know it? Come into the house. There's some mail for you."

He led the way into the house and flung open the door of a room that was half office, half lounging-place. Rifles, lariats and saddles littered the floor and every corner was hung with cobwebs dark with the accumulated dust of years. A great table against the wall was heaped with old copies of the county paper that had not been unwrapped. The newly arrived mail lay in a little heap where Crocker had flung it. He reached for a big brown manila envelope and tossed it to his top-hand.

"Here, catch," he said. "This is yours."

Phil caught it in midair, dropped his hat and ripped the envelope open. Crocker watched him as he studied a mass of legal-looking papers that slipped out. Finally he emitted a little whistle and turned to the waiting Crocker.

"Say, Crock," he drawled, "what'd you do if somebody was to leave you a fortune?"

"Who? Me? If anyone was to say he'd left me a fortune, I'd look for a joker in the pack. I'd know damned well there was somethin' phoney about it. Who's done left you a fortune, Phil?"

Phil scanned the letter, which was written on a single sheet.

"Did you ever hear of Judge White over in Mesquite?" he asked.

"Sure I know him," growled Crocker. "That was a good many years ago, though, when I was as young as you and most as big a fool."

"Go on! What's he got to say?"

"He tells me that by the will of the late Henry Peters—Lord, but I'm sorry Mister Peters is dead—I have been left a half interest in his Lying Y Ranch over in Cienago County. . . . What ails you?" he asked sharply. "You lost your mind?" For at the words "Lying Y," Crocker doubled up like a man in agony. He straightened up, but his eyes were wet from laughing.

"I told you I'd look fer the joker," he said gaspingly. "That's it! The Lyin' Y is the joker."

"What's the matter with the Lyin' Y?" demanded Phil. "What d'you know about it? Myself, I only know it's away over near the Nevada Line and that Henry Peters owned it. He was my godfather, a rich old bachelor and an old friend of my mother's long before she and my father met. Just where is the Lyin' Y Ranch?"

Crocker drew out a big wall map that hung on a roller and dropped a horny forefinger on a dark spot on the map. Phil studied that spot and grinned.

"This isn't it," he said. "It looks like all the flies in the world been celebratin' Old Home Week here."

"That ain't so damned inappropriate either," said Crocker grimly. "You listen."

"Go on." Phil perched on the table and lit a cigarette.

"Look at this here range o' mountains. It's called the Espinazo del Mundo. That means Backbone of the World, and that's what the old-time Spanish priests who found it believed it was. Ever seen that range close to?"

PHIL had seen that range once, but it was across eighty miles of desert and he knew that its craggy masses walled a separate world. Even the intrepid Jackson, first English-speaking white man to set foot in this forbidding land, had never braved those hills of the Backbone of the World. He had gone around them.

"Those hills are bad enough," growled Crocker. "They form a natural boundary between the Lyin' Y to the south and Trecientos Ranch to the north. The last is Leo Crex's place."

"I never heard of Leo Crex," said Phil shortly, his eyes on the map. "Who is he?"

"There are a lot o' men south of the Line who kin tell a lot about Leo Crex," said Crocker, "but they don't talk a whole lot. I'll tell you all I've heard. Away down in Sonora in Old Mexico they say that old Crex landed from a whalin' ship at Guaymas. He was a soldier under Benito Juarez, but he must have been just a kid then. Anyhow there was talk about his havin' got away with some of the imperial jewels.

"I can't say about that. Most likely it was just talk. All we really know is that some years ago old man Crex turned up north of the Line and that he had a poke full o' money when he needed it most—just as the Trecientos Ranch was throwed on the market.

"The place is called Trecientos because it runs about three hundred thousand acres. Old Leo Crex lives there with his son Walter and, believe me, he sure does run it."

"Well, why shouldn't he run it? Doesn't he own it?"

"Oh, he owns Trecientos," drawled Crocker. "If I was aimin' to do business near Leo Crex, I'd never tell you a word of what I've said.

"Men say he runs Trecientos like the old Spanish owners used to run their *encomiendos* — no questions asked. Hell, man! There ain't a man near enough to Trecientos to ask questions. Leo Crex lives there with his son. He's got a bunch o' white men spewed up from the South. Heaven only knows where they come from. He only has Mexican labor to work the place and no Mexican is ever fired from Trecientos."

"That seems to speak pretty well for the place, doesn't it?"

"It speaks damned loud anyhow," said Crocker. "There's been a good many men hinted that old man Crex practiced peonage; that no Mexican is ever allowed to leave the place because he's held in practical slavery. But no man has ever made a formal charge, and without a charge there can't be an investigation. Crex'd kill the first man to complain and everyone knows it."

"That's all about Trecientos," said Phil. "You haven't mentioned the Lying Y. Where does it come in?"

"ABOUT thirty years ago Henry Peters bought the Lying Y Ranch," said Crocker, "and he put Sam Marks on it as manager. Some people say Peters owed Marks a lot of money. Some say Marks saved Peters' life. All I know is that if Sam Marks didn't save Henry Peters' life, it's about the only thing he hasn't saved. He'd skin a louse fer its tallow.

"Anyhow, Trecientos lies north of the Espinazo range; the Lyin' Y lies south of it. They come together at an angle on the saddle and the pass between the two ranches is the only one across the range for a hundred miles.

"Henry Peters was an invalid and hasn't seen the Lyin' Y for years. He put Marks in as manager and trusted him. Gosh man! You couldn't look for Marks to do any different. They say the Lyin' Y is just a big feeder for Trecientos."

"How do you mean, a feeder? I don't sabe."

"You will. Look at that map." Crocker's big hand swept athwart the paper. "That range of the Lyin' Y with free range runs for miles. Years ago old Peters put Hereford bulls on the range. At that time he owned the only cattle there. Now every man in the Amargo Valley owns a lot of white-faced Hereford cattle that the Lyin' Y bulls have sired and that Henry Peters paid for. Then

Sam Marks started his own brand. So did Joe Upton and Si Wills.

"What for? I'll show you. When every other ranchman in the valley ships his cattle out to California to be fattened for the market, payin' freight charges both ways, what do Marks and Upton and Wills and Crex do?"

"Well, what do they do? I'll bite."

"All right. Old man Crex must have traveled some in his day. It seems that he went to Honolulu on that whalin' ship. He learned out there how they irrigate fer sugar cane. They put a reservoir on every hilltop, a pump in every valley, and pumped the water up. Then they let it run back by gravity to where they need water.

"What Leo Crex seen 'em do fer sugar cane, he does on Trecientos fer grass. He spent a lot o' money and a lot o' Greaser labor buildin' them tanks on every hill and now he's got thousands of acres of good alfalfa. Sam Marks shoots his cattle across the Espinazos. Leo Crex fattens 'em. They herd straight to the market and skim the cream of the prices."

"Well. That's good business. What's wrong with that?"

"Not a damned thing — with that." Crocker grinned amiably at him; then he took a pencil stub from his pocket, drew a paper to him and, apparently aimlessly, drew some marks on the paper. Phil, staring at him, saw those lines grow into a "Y."

That was, of course, the Lying Y brand but under Crocker's heavy hand it changed form into a Bar-Diamond-Bar.

"That's entered in the county brand book as Upton's private brand," said Crocker.

Again the facile pencil flew across the soiled paper and Phil, bending over the artist's shoulder saw a third brand grow into being.

"Bar Chevron," said Crocker. "That's Sam Marks' own brand. A few years ago he owned only a few head o' stock, but they tell me that from what they see some of his cows have four er five calves a year. Must be good stock he's runnin'. That's about all, I reckon."

He thrust the pencil into his pocket and tore the paper into pieces.

"GOOD Lord, man. Plain rustlin'. Can you prove that?"

"If I was livin' over there in range of Leo Crex's rifle I tell you plain I'd never have told you a word," said Crocker. "I'm too old to git into a range war. Good men have died on the open range over there and they was always men who'd fallen out with Crex.

"And there was never even a suspicion o' Crex's work. He's got a damned pirate by name o' Pym who's his main hand. He's got about twenty others on the Trecientos payroll and I tell you the man who trips over Leo Crex's rope gits into a bad jam. Ten words of what I've told you would loosen Leo Crex's gun in its holster."

"Men say you're not slow at that yourself, Crock."

"I'm lookin' fer peace in my last days," said Crocker. "If I was you, I'd be damned keerful how I went over there and claimed half of the Lyin' Y till I knowed who owns the other half."

"It's a girl," said Phil, glancing at the letter. "This says she is a Miss Ellen Mathis, a niece of old man Peters. It looks funny to me, Crock. Just as I've saved enough money to buy a few head o' stock I find I'm half-owner of the Lyin' Y and you tell me I'm stuck before I start."

"No, no. You get me wrong. All I'm sayin' is that over there you'll probably find some damned queer dealin's goin' on an' mighty few people who care a hell of a lot. I tell you, straight, son, Sam Marks and Leo Crex have been milkin' that Lyin' Y Ranch fer twenty years and they're not goin' to turn straight because of a man neither of 'em ever heard of an' a girl, too. Get me?"

"I see. If you were me, Crock, wouldn't you jump at it?"

Burly Ben Crocker, who had managed the Cross Bar for many years, who kept only good men on his payroll, nodded wordlessly. He had worked shoulder to shoulder with Phil for three years. In rodeo and round-up, on herd and on trail and in the dust and turmoil of the branding pens he had tested his man as well as in wild headlong stampedes and reckless frontier action. He liked Phil Kynaston.

"I'd jump at it, all right," he said, "but sure as hell I'd look to see what kind of a landin' I had before I jumped. Let's have a drink on it."

He went to a closet and came back with a decanter and glasses and glanced about for the water pitcher.

"Damn that cook," he growled. "I've told him a hundred times to keep a filled pitcher here." He stepped to the door and shouted to the kitchen where the old Mexican cook clashed among his pans. In answer to his hail the old ranch cook, Pedro Martinez, appeared wiping his soapy hands on a dirty cloth.

"Damn it all, Pedro," said Crocker sharply, "I've told you to always keep water here. Fill the pitcher."

Crocker's voice had lost its petulance and Phil grinned at the change in tone. Pedro had lived at the Cross Bar since the days when Crocker lived in a tent, and Crocker could no more have hurt the little man's feelings than he could have hurt a woman.

Pedro took the red glass pitcher and disappeared and they heard the iron pump clanking under his hands. He came back into the room while Crocker was still talking.

"So, you see, I'd lay mighty low with Marks. Take my advice, too, and don't be drawn into a row with Leo Crex—"

"Crash!"

The red glass water pitcher dropped from Pedro's nerveless hands and broke into a score of pieces and the water flooded the floor.

"Damn it all," raged Crocker. "Pedro, if you want to bathe, go to the shed. . . . See you later, Phil . . . ."

Phil headed for the bunkhouse, but while he was still in the hall, a hand was laid on his arm and Martinez stopped him. His hands were filled with pieces of the broken pitcher and his eyes were alight.

"Señor," he said briefly, "I could not help overhearing your words. If you go over into the Trecientos country, I wish to go with you."

"You . . . ." Phil stared at the little man. "Why, man, you're a cook. I have no job to offer you, Pedro. You'd be a fool to leave here."

"I know that well, señor. But I have my reasons that some day I will tell you. Will you take me?"

Phil hesitated. If he were taking over the Lying Y Ranch he might need a cook, but he was not. Marks would have his own men. On the other hand, from what Crocker said, a loyal man might mean much. Too, he did not like to take Crocker's cook. He temporized.

"I'll be glad to take you, Pedro," he said, "if you fix it with Señor Crocker and he has no objection. But I think you are mighty foolish. What do you know of this man Marks?" But Pedro's face showed no feeling.

"Or this man Leo Crex?" Phil went on. At that name the little Mexican's face seemed to freeze and his eyes lit with a sudden glare that reminded Phil of the eyes of a mountain lion he had seen treed by the hounds and making up his mind to leap from safety into the baying pack below him.

"All right, Pedro. You fix it with Mister Crocker and it'll be all right with me."

"They're all alike . . . ." Crocker stormed into the hall and Pedro caught him by the sleeve and explained at length. "They've all got itchin' feet. But I don't object. If you want to come back, Pedro," he said in a kindly tone, "just come.

"I'm really glad you have him," he said to Phil. "The man is loyal and honest and truthful. See you later."

"I'll be leavin' at daylight, Pedro," said Phil to the little cook. "Be ready then if you're goin' with me."

"Take that li'l Mexican pack-mule," said Crocker. "You'll need her. You kin send her back, or bring her when you get busted and come back as rider," he said amiably. "If you're as wise as I think you are, you'll trade your share of the Lyin' Y fer a lame burro and then shoot the burro."

All the bunkhouse watched them go, Pedro on the ewe-necked bay that he had bought for seven apple pies; Phil on his blue roan that made every man on the Cross Bar payroll break the Tenth Commandment. A dozen men stood and watched the two figures merge into the red dust wreaths and when the dust settled down into a low-lying bank, Crocker turned back to his lonely house.

"I tried to put him wise," he muttered, "but I might better have saved my breath to cool my porridge. He's headin' for trouble just as sure as sparks fly upward."

Unaware of the trouble that was at that moment brewing behind the far horizon, Phil Kynaston with Pedro Martinez and the jangling pack-mule at his heels, rode straight westward and headed for the distant line of the Espinazo ranges.

CHAPTER II

At the Devil's Pocket

A HEAVY, rumbling roar filled all space. It swung to and fro among the craggy peaks and camps of the forbidding Espinazo range and came back in reverberating billows of sound. It sank to a low roar like the beat of distant heavy surf and broke into a volley of sharp reports as cannon after cannon found its voice flinging the echoes high in air. Then a ball of yellowish smoke shot up above a hill-shoulder and was followed by the rush and roar of falling rock and earth.

Leo Crex jerked his horse to a sudden stop in the rocky trail that led through the jaws of the pass and eyed that ball of smoke as a snake eyes a bird.

"That's over in the Bulso de Diablo—Devil's Pocket," he muttered. "As sure as hell it it. Now who can have found his way over there?"

He swung out of saddle on the off-side, jerked a short saddle gun from its scabbard, threw the reins over his pony's head, definitely anchoring him to that spot. Then he started up the stiff slope through the tough scrub that stretched out detaining limbs.

Men needed no warning that Leo Crex was a bad man. His very appearance was a constant warning of the fact. His big bullet head was crowned by a five-gallon black Stetson hat around which a rattlesnake skin band was looped. Under that hat gray eyes, lighter in color than his face, spelled "killer."

A square-cut black beard almost hid a straight gash of a mouth. The rest was a burly figure shapeless in coarse blue denim and brown corduroy trousers tucked into heavy boots that supported rusty Mexican spurs with rowels as big as saucers.

The man was a distinct throwback to early fighting days, and the fact was not hidden by civilized clothing. All he really needed for appropriate dress was a club and a bearskin.

His feet slipped in the sharp gravel and he slid to his knees. He scrambled to his feet and pushed upward to the low crest. That mass of yellow smoke that told of dynamite was oozing slowly above the treetops a half mile to his right front. He stood staring at it for a long moment before he plunged headlong into the thick brush and headed toward it.

"Damn it all," he gasped, "I might ha' knowed someone was sure to find that place. It was just a question o' time till somebody struck it. By gar! I'll put a bullet in the man who's jumpin' my claim. I'll learn 'em—"

Need for breath cut him short and a steep downhill grade took toll of him. Stiff brush laced with vines checked and impeded him, and sweat that started in big drops ran down his face and gemmed his beard. But he struggled to the last low crest that walled in the Devil's Pocket, where he paused for breath.

HE knew that Devil's Pocket as a man knows his own front yard. Behind him, across three ranges of the Espinazo hills lay the great Trecientos Rancho. Before him, a short mile, where the pass opened onto the gently sloping land to the south, lay the ranges of the Lying Y where Sam Marks' herds waited for him. But Leo Crex knew that the real wealth that gave him power, that had made him the most dread power in three counties, lay right here in the Bulso de Diablo.

That Bulso de Diablo was more than any mere pocket. It was a tract of some five thousand acres tucked away in deep-cut cañons whose bottoms were rarely warmed by the sunlight. Time and again Leo Crex had vainly tried to gain a title to that tract. It was his one failure and it rankled.

In a life spent in trampling on the rights of others he had in this one instance failed to get what he wanted and the failure hurt him almost physically.

Like the dog-in-the-manger, he had determined that if he could not legally claim it, no one else should have it. In the meantime he had for years been systematically "milking" the place of the richest kind of ore.

"Now who in hell kin that be?" he muttered tensely.

His quick ears caught the sharp tinkle of iron on rock, then the sound of a shovel; then a dry cough that ended in a genial curse. He knew now what it was. Some prospector had stumbled on the place that he had been mining for years—the place to which he could not establish a claim that would allow him to work it openly.

"Some damned wild-catter stealin' ore

to take to Pintano fer an assay," he muttered. "I'll damned soon stop that."

With a careful hand he parted the brush before him and, squatting low, looked down into the pocket below him. A wiry pack-pony with loaded *aparejos* snatched hungrily at the mesquite scrub while two men leisurely "threw" the diamond hitch over some filled ore sacks on the pack. Their genial curses came to Crex on the hot wind.

"There!" A little square-shouldered man stepped back from the pony. "Three full sacks is more'n enough fer him to pack. When Abe Gray gets his eyes on that, we'll know if our guess is right.

"By heck, Hard Rock, if we're right, an' after years of prospectin' we got a chance to be wrong, we'll be millionaires. Kin you make Pintano tomorrer with them sacks?" And little Scotty Rames stepped back and filled his pipe.

All the long valley of the Amargo knew Scotty Rames and his partner, Hard Rock Simms. A desert rat for thirty years, old Scotty's pick had pried into the bowels of most of the hills that ringed the valley. Always broke, frequently hunting a grubstake, but always quiet and civil-spoken, Scotty was welcome wherever men gathered in cow camps or mining centers.

All the Amargo Valley was his stamping ground, but this Espinazo country was new to him. Because Leo Crex lived to the north of those forbidding ranges was reason enough to keep most men away, but old Scotty Rames was different. So, too, was Hard Rock Simms, his partner.

Hard Rock was well named and his face was a true index to his character. For years he and old Scotty had worked together sharing fat and lean times, always hoping for that dream of a prospector's heaven — a strip of six-inch blue gravel, a gentle slope that needed little timbering and water. Here they had found it.

"Yeah." Hard Rock straightened up from tucking the end of the lash rope under the manta. "I'll make Pintano all right if the pony holds out. I'll make old Abe Gray set up when he sees this ore.

"I'll git his report an' bring it back just to satisfy you. But we don't need no assayer to tell us what we've got. Sure as hell we know fool's gold from the real thing. I'd like to know who started that damn glory hole on the hillside above us. I been aimin' to take a look at that. I'll do it now. Come on."

HE pointed to the red scar of a deep drift above them on the slope where the refuse had been shoveled out in past years. And Leo Crex, watching them, cursed them almost audibly. He knew that glory hole better than he knew his own house.

He had driven that drift. He had timbered up its crumbling walls. He had driven its crooked tunnel into the stiff hillside. He had through years skillfully looted the ore veins of a small fortune while he unsuccessfully sought some way to claim the veins without letting the world know what he had found.

"Wasn't the old Maricopa Minin' Company claims somewhere about here?" demanded Hard Rock.

"Yeah." Scotty looked up from filling his pipe. "They took up some claims about here and started to work 'em, but water come in on the lower levels an' they give up the whole thing. They never thought o' cross-cuttin' to pick up the vein.

"Hell man! That was way back when Lordsburg was a water-hole fer the California-bound emigrant trains.

"We'd best stake out our claims here, Hard Rock. I'll tend to that while you're in Pintano. It's a good thing fer us we didn't git anybody to grubstake us this trip. As it stands, the whole caboodle belongs to us. Just you an' me. Too damned bad we had to hock our guns to buy powder. If we'd had guns we'd have lived better."

"Yeah. First time I ever hocked a gun." He raised his voice in a shout. "Comin' up to see that glory hole?" he asked.

Above them, Leo Crex, listening avidly, caught only a few words, but they were enough to tell him exactly what had happened. These two desert rats had by sheer, dumb, damned prospectors' luck stumbled into the very place that he had been quietly milking for years. A place where he dared not stake out claims lest he fail to get title and yet notify the world of his find.

This tract of land between Trecientos and the Lying Y Ranch belonged to no one. Well . . . . he would see to it that these two old fools did not profit by their

knowledge. He must keep them from ever telling the secret to the world.

He scanned their camp. It was just an ordinary prospector's camping place; a fireplace built of loose malpais rock, an old Dutch oven lying on its side. A little brush and canvas wickeyup, some picks and shovels lying by the bedding and a box that Crex knew held dynamite.

The sight of that dynamite box really determined Crex. One more blast like the one he had heard might give notice to the world that gold was here. That would bring a rush of gold-seekers to the valley and his business with Sam Marks would be ruined forever. He might never get such a chance again. He squatted and watched the two men scramble up the hillside to the old glory hole that he had dug.

There was little enough to attract anyone at that hole, but it held Rames and Simms as the prize holds men in a lottery. The open cut ran back for fifty feet straight into the hillside on a dropping grade. Little piles of ore and rock and schist lay along the sides where Crex and his workmen laboring under his personal directions had heaped the poorer ore from time to time.

The two men were gone some ten minutes and came back talking loudly and swearing pleasantly. Crex could hear Hard Rock's voice raised in excited comment.

"This ain't any old mine entrance," he said. "This place's been worked regularly. Look at the powder stains on the rock. Good gravy, man! Look at that vein! Ham boiled in champagne, I call it! Maybe I'd better try to git some more powder, Scotty. What say? We kin tear the floor outen the world with some o' that Giant forty per cent stuff. Then we'll know what we've got."

"I know right now," said Scotty. "I sized up the dip o' the ore veins before we began to countersink. That's why I had you put in that last blast. Come on. You better git started."

They slithered down the culm bank and strode back to their old camp and Hard Rock busied himself with the pack-pony.

LEO CREX eyed them dispassionately. Save for the three men from his own ranch at Trecientos whom for various reasons he knew he could trust not to betray him, these two old desert rats were the only men in the world who knew the value of this Devil's Pocket. They must never get back to Pintano to spread the news.

Two lucky shots would forever seal the secret of the Bulso de Diablo, for no one ever came here except his own men under his own directions when he stole the ore from the workings.

He knew exactly how to seal the mouths of these two men. He gently levered a cartridge into the chamber of his rifle and squatted among the scrub as his rifle muzzle came into line with Scotty Rames's neck.

The flat, smacking report of the rifle filled all space. It flung from crag to crag in eddies of sound and the sharp echoes rang again and again as the short, sharp recoil flung Crex off his balance. He scrambled to his feet in time to see Scotty Rames pitch forward and fall face down on the gravel.

Crex leaped to his feet and frenziedly jerked the rifle lever to seat another cartridge. That other man, Hard Rock Simms, must not get away. But he worked too fast and too carelessly. The fired shell half withdrawn, met the new shell on the carrier and both tipped up and with a sharp click the mechanism was jammed. He snatched again and again at the lever and swore viciously as he could not clear it.

Then he jerked again, and his jerk freed a thick madrone branch that whipped into his face and struck him sharply in the eye. Through a bloody maze he was aware of the scuttering rush of running feet on the gravel below him. He saw a loaded pack-pony with a half-crazed man atop the ore-sacks scurrying for cover.

When Leo Crex regained full sight he saw Scotty Rames's body lying prone on the gravel below him, but Hard Rock Simms and the pony had disappeared. He could hear them crashing through the brush in the canyon far below him as he drew himself to his full height and cursed with a blistering tongue.

"If he'd recognized me I'd have one hell of a time," he muttered. "But he never seen me. Now I'll cover my tracks."

He pocketed the empty shell and carefully scattered some earth over his footprints. Then after one casual glance at the body of his victim, he turned on his

heel, spat out a huge quid of tobacco and started back across the hills toward his horse.

Not a qualm disturbed him as he thrust his rifle into its scabbard, seized the saddle-horn and swung into saddle. Those two men had been a distinct menace to his plans. He had removed Scotty Rames exactly as he would have got rid of a vinagarone from his bedding.

But . . . . Hard Rock Simms must be attended to. He must not be left at large perhaps to revisit the place, or to talk over the killing. Crex must take immediate steps to anticipate and prevent what Hard Rock might do. He knew that he could never overtake Hard Rock in the mazes of the deep canyons, but he knew, too, that there was no great need for haste. It would take Hard Rock two full days to get to Pintano with a loaded pack-pony, himself afoot.

How to get that man Hard Rock? How could he do it? The question recurred to him a dozen times as he rode down the trail. It was not till he reached the turn in the trail that led off to his goal—the Lying Y Ranch—that the solution came to him.

"That's best of all," he said. "It's just a plain story and it sounds so damned natural I'd almost believe it myself. Hard Rock Simms killed his own partner and I seen him do it."

THE big ranch house of the Lying Y seemed deserted as he rode up to the door, but the patter of his horse's feet brought Sam Marks to the door.

Sam was in his undershirt and trousers and he walked with his permanent limp that was the result of an old break when a bucking pony flung him against a corral fence. That leg had been badly broken and worse set by old Doc Lisle, who had practiced in Pintano for five years.

"By gar, Leo," Sam said as Crex rode to the doorway, "you must be a mind reader. I was just a-wishin' fer you. I sent Red Dyer over to Trecientos with a letter for you. Trouble's sure in sight, Leo."

"I know damned well it is," snapped Crex. "I run into some of it. Let's go inside the house. I got somethin' to tell you. You might give me a drink too, Sam."

Marks led the way to his office, set bottle and glasses on the desk and politely turned his back while Crex filled a tumbler to the brim and drank it off unwinkingly. Then Leo flopped into a chair, filled a stinking pipe and lit it.

"You know the Devil's Pocket," he said shortly.

Marks nodded and sat up and his hands gripped at his chair arms. He knew well enough what Crex had been doing the past three years though it suited him to maintain silence about it.

"That old-time Maricopa Minin' Company used to own them hills," said Crex. "They went busted the time water got in on the lowest level. They was sinkin' a shaft that year. Any fool could ha' told 'em they was all wrong. They left the place the year I bought Trecientos. I've told you this before, ain't I?"

"Some of it, but go on."

"I knowed there was ore there. Hell, man! That was what brung me out o' Mexico. There was a li'l Mexican named Vasquez. He was a carpenter who worked up here on some church buildin'. His father was a carpenter on one of the missions before him and the father had given him an old map that he got out of an old mission prayer book.

"I'm tellin' you just what I had to work on, Sam. The Vasquez I knowed had got from his father the story of the Yaqui Mines . . . . Well, I happened to save Miguel Vasquez from bein' knifed. Then him and me got across the International Line just in time—"

"Yeah. They said you brung along with you some jewels you didn't pay fer."

"What of that? Where else would I have got the money to pay for Trecientos? Well . . . . Then Vasquez turned up at Trecientos with his family and him and me hunted ten years fer that lost Yaqui Mine . . . . What the hell ails you?" he asked sharply at a quick exclamation from Marks.

"Nothin'. On'y . . . . Vasquez . . . . Wasn't there some talk of a sister er a daughter er somethin' like that?"

"Yeah, I believe there was." But Leo Crex's face was a mask. He did not care to say more. He had hoped the few who knew that tale had forgotten it. That the story was dead — as the girl was — as Miquel Vasquez was. He swallowed a little liquor and went on:

"You know how I hit on that vein up in the Devil's Pocket. But even you didn't

know that vein is the vein of the Yaqui Mine."

"My God, man!" Marks gaped at him. He knew the legends of that lost mine. He knew men who had wandered far and wide trying to locate it and here, if Leo Crex was telling the truth, it was on their front doorstep, so to speak. He heard Crex go on.

"I was laid up with a busted arm the year the Maricopa sold out and quit and I never gave the matter a thought till later. It was just damned fool luck that took me to that ore-lead. I drove my tunnel sixty feet beyond where the Maricopa stopped and I hit it right. Then came the trouble. I couldn't file on the land.

"You see when the Maricopa went busted they threw the whole tract back into the list of lands fer sale. That was while I was laid up with an arm broke. A man named Sturton bought the land fer scrip. If I had filed claims I'd not have got 'em and I'd only have let the world know there was gold in the Espinazos.

"I kept quiet and tried to find Sturton, but I never could git touch with him. That's where I been gittin' cash to put up the reservoirs that we been usin' to raise alfalfa to fat our cattle. The same that you been so damned thoughtful as to keep fer us both on the Lyin' Y. Sabe that?"

"You bet I do, but Leo—why can't we keep on workin' that place? What does she run, Leo?"

"Better than two thousand dollars to the ton and nobody but me an' Walter, my son, and the two or three Greasers I had workin' there knows about it. Man, if I could git legal title to claims in that Devil's Pocket, you an' me'd have a fortune a whole lot better'n we're makin' offen the Lyin' Y an' all its cattle. The trouble is that damned man Sturton. He owns the place on scrip, like I tell you and I never been able to find him. I daren't advertise fer him. A hell of a thing happened today over there—"

CREX paused for another drink and Marks watched him. Presently he went on:

"As I was riding acrost the pass on my way here, I heard a dynamite blast go off and I seen yellow smoke risin' in the Bulso de Diablo. I left my horse an' trailed over there to see who it was.

"You know them two old desert rats Scotty Rames an' Hard Rock Simms?"

"O' course I know 'em," said Marks. "Who don't?"

"They were workin' a drift mine in the hill right below my glory hole," said Crex passionately. "They had druv a drift entrance and they had took out a lot of ore. They had sacked a lot of it. I took my eyes offen 'em fer not more'n two minutes. I heard a shot fired an' when I looked again that devil Hard Rock Simms had shot his partner Scotty Rames. Some quarrel over the mine, I reckon. Anyhow, Scotty was dead and Hard Rock was standin' over him. Shot his own partner."

"What? His own partner? Good Lord, man! What'd you do?"

"Do? I couldn't do nothin'. I'd left my gun on my saddle. I watched Hard Rock Simms get the pony started an' pull his freight. He didn't even bury Rames. Then I came back to my horse and rode on down here. The devil of it is, Sam . . . ."

"Well, what? Go on!"

"That man Hard Rock Simms knows now exactly what the Bulso de Diablo covers. The minute he goes back to Pintano he'll spread word of gold in the Espinazos and that'll just about ruin us. There'll be one hell of a gold rush for the Devil's Pocket.

"That means that there'll be a thousand men in the land about the pass. That means we can't drive no more cattle across the range. See? We got to stop that man Hard Rock Simms from talkin' about what he found before he gets started."

"When he gets into Pintano," said Marks, "he'll take that ore to Abe Gray to be assayed. There's one damned good way to stop Simms from talkin'. If he left the Devil's Pocket when you did, he ought to be in Pintano now."

"No. You forget he had a loaded pony and is travelin' on foot," said Crex. "That'll save us. I'll just git on into Pintano an' tell Sheriff Girton I seen Hard Rock Simms murder his partner! That'll cinch him, I reckon . . . . You said you sent me a letter, Sam, by Red Dyer. What was it?"

"Oh, yes. I'd forgot that in what you told me." Marks turned to his desk and picked up an open letter. "I got this today," he said. "It's a letter from a girl named Ellen Mathis. It seems that old

Henry Peters who owned this Lyin' Y Ranch died and left the ranch half to this here girl Ellen Mathis and half to a man named Philip Kynaston. She enclosed me a proved copy of the will.

"Here it is." He held up a legal-looking document that crackled in his hands. "She writes me that she's on her way out here to make her home at the Lyin' Y Ranch. She says she'll arrive at Pintano on the eighteenth. This is the eleventh right now, too. Does that mean anything to you?"

"It means a hell of a lot," growled Crex. "It means that our plan to drive your herds across the ranges to Trecientos will fall flat if that girl's here. But where's the man Kynaston?"

"I don't know an' keer a damned sight less," grunted Marks. "All I know is that I been handlin' the Lyin' Y fer years and Henry Peters had ought to have left it to me, the damned old miser. I know I'm not goin' to have a tenderfoot girl come traipsin' out here and steal my livin' outen my plate."

"Yeah. That's bad. It'll be just as bad as havin' that damned man Simms footloose," said Crex. "If that Mathis girl gets here our cattle deals are ruined. How many cattle was you figurin' to swing acrost to me, Sam, this time?"

"Call it five thousand," said Marks. "It'll take me all o' ten days to get 'em and to change the brands. I can't trust that to just anybody. Why?"

"Because," said Crex forcefully, "that girl mustn't reach the Lyin' Y Ranch till them cattle are safe across the Espinazos and in my pens. You say you sent me a letter by Dyer? He must have passed me while I was over in the Devil's Pocket. Here's what we'll do, Sam."

Marks looked at him hopefully but said no word.

"That girl has never seen the Lyin' Y Ranch. Has she ever been West?"

Marks scanned the letter. "She says not," he said.

"Good. Then here's what we'll do. She's due here on the eighteenth. I'll have my son Walter meet her at the train. He'll bring her, not to the Lyin' Y here but across the pass to Trecientos. She's never seen neither, so she'll not know the difference till too late.

"When she gits to Trecientos we'll keep her there till we git the cattle safe and sound across the pass. They'll all be rebranded by the time she sees 'em—if she ever does.

"When I git her, by heck, I'll keep her till she'll be damned glad to buy her freedom. In the meantime we got first of all to git Hard Rock Simms. He mustn't get Abe Gray to make an assay fer him. We can't afford to have a gold rush started for the Espinazos."

CHAPTER III

A Gruesome Job

HARD ROCK SIMMS had punched rock from the hills of Copper River to Managua and he was no fool. Fools do not outlive that adventure. He was no fool, but—he had no gun.

He dropped by instinct at the shot that killed his partner, and luck, the blind luck that is footloose west of the Great River, threw him into a shallow depression in which Leo Crex could not see him. He knew there was no use wasting time over old Scotty. When men are shot through the head they always fall as Scotty fell — on their faces. Hard Rock reacted to that shot as a prairie dog does to a stone. He dived for cover and found it.

Quick as he was, the loaded pony was still quicker. While Hard Rock was still scurrying for shelter, that pony, loaded with three ore sacks, leaped over the prostrate man, and while Leo Crex wrestled profanely with his jammed rifle, horse and man disappeared in the heavy brush.

Secure from further shots, Hard Rock paused for breath. He knew the pony could not keep up that gait far. He could catch him in a few miles. In the meantime — who had fired that shot? And why?

These two quetions beat at his brain. So far as he knew neither he nor Scotty had an enemy in the world. If that was correct it seemed to eliminate the personal element, but that made it worse. The problem remained unsolved.

For ten minutes he lay there struggling for breath and in that ten minutes he lived a score of years, but he got an answer to his problem. If old Scotty Rames had not been killed by a personal enemy then he had been killed by someone who resented his being at this particular place. Who could that be? There was but one answer. Of course it must be

the man who had dug that glory hole above them.

Hard Rock had prospected all over the land for years and in those years he had picked up many of the tales and legends that told of lost mines. His mind instantly recurred to those ore-seams that he had seen in the heading in the glory hole. That work had been done fairly recently. The powder smoke on the rock told that. That could only mean someone else had been working the place.

"But there were no claim stakes in sight. Both he and Scotty had seen to that. Poor though they were, both men were as honest as the day and would never have dreamed of jumping another man's claim.

"Some damned wildcat," he muttered. "Wild-cattin' it an' keepin' it quiet to avoid a rush here. I wonder who it is an' why. Certain we've done stepped on someone's toes. Pore old Scotty wouldn't have hurt a coyote. . . ."

A sudden thought told him that he must not leave the body where it fell. Of course he must get back to civilization and report the murder — but then there would be another difficulty. The moment he reported the murder there would be an investigation and that would mean the discovery of the ore-bed that he and Scotty had risked so much to find.

He knew that deposit was rich beyond the dreams of avarice. The moment a real gold rush developed, he would lose every chance of getting the ore. He could not let anyone know about this place till he had formally filed his claims. Obviously the first thing to be done was to move the body so that the investigation would not disclose the ore veins. To move the body he would need the pony.

He scrambled to his feet, moved lightly through the brush and paused where the old trail dropped into a deep arroyo. Questing like a hound at fault, he found a hoof-slide on the lip of the cut where the pony had gone over. Bending low to escape observation, he moved down the gully, pausing from time to time to look for hoofprints in the hard soil.

"That pony is skeered to death," he muttered, "an' I don't blame him none, either. If I only had my gun I'd ketch that murderer in a mile. Damned if I kin figger it out. Not a soul knew me an' Scotty was comin' here. We didn't know, ourselves, till we got here. Sure as hell, the man who dug that glory hole is the man who shot Scotty. Thank the Lord," he said, sobbing for breath, "there's the pony."

It was the pony, stuck fast between two pinnacles of jutting rock that caught the wide-spread *aparejos* and held him like a vise. In a moment Hard Rock stripped the saddle, released the frightened horse, reset the *aparejos,* led the animal up the slope, and slowly started back along the trail.

HIS heart was in his mouth as he worked up the draw. He knew his danger, but Scotty had been his partner and a partnership like that binds as close as blood ties. He must get the body.

With the scared pony stepping on his heels he worked up the arroyo, climbed to the level and dropped again into the depression that had saved his life. The only sound was the wind roaring through the pines far above him and an occasional stamp and rattle from the pony.

For ten minutes he did not move a muscle while his quick eyes took in every detail of the Devil's Pocket. He noted a great Clarke's crow, white and black like a giant magpie, hopping among the brush and he realized that if a living man were in sight that crow would long ago have given warning. He rose and strode over to the dead body of Scotty Rames.

The body lay exactly as the man had fallen. The soft-nosed bullet, striking squarely at a range less than two hundred yards, had been practically explosive. The back of the neck was shattered and the body lay in a welter of blood.

Hard Rock examined the body from every angle without disturbing it and little drops of sweat formed and ran down his face. He had loved the dour little Scotty with a love like that of David for Jonathan; "passing the love of women." He moved from point to point about the old camp-site and finally, squatting by the old fireplace, rolled a cigarette and gave himself up to thought.

Suddenly he burst forth explosively, "If I had a rifle I'd foller that man through hell-fire. If I could only find his trail."

He scouted each ridge but there was no sign of any trail. Leo Crex took care of that. Tired and hot, Hard Rock came back to the fireplace.

"Sure as hell I kin fix a trap fer him," he growled. "I on'y hope it don't ketch the wrong man. I reckon there's no danger of that here."

He went to the abandoned box of dynamite and filled his pockets with the greasy sticks of yellow, paper-covered explosive. Then he grubbed in the box and brought out very carefully a little box stuffed with cotton that, when opened, disclosed a dozen tiny copper cylinders about as big around as a pencil and an inch long.

Fulminate of mercury caps used to fire dynamite! He put some of these in his pocket and started up the slope heading for the old glory hole.

THE drift ran for some fifty feet into the hill face before the tunnel began. He passed by little piles of old ore and culm piled along the drift till he came to the heading, where the tunnel ended on the rock-face. A pile of ore, hitherto unnoticed, attracted his eyes and he picked up a sample. Suddenly he drew his breath hard and glanced about him. An iron drill, still sticking in an old shot hole that had not been fired, caught his eye. The former worker had started that hole for a dynamite blast but it had never been completed.

Hard Rock smashed the ore specimen on the iron bar. It cracked like a nut and dropped open in his hands. He stood astounded. A single vein of yellow that he knew at once, ran from side to side of that specimen. He moved to the wall and took out his knife and scratched from time to time. Finally he paused and wiped the streaming sweat from his face.

"It's no wonder the man was willin' to kill to keep it," he growled. "But sure as hell he killed the wrong man when he killed Scotty. I'll git him fer that and I'll git him right."

He pulled at the drill, standing in the hole, and finally got it out. It was an ordinary drill, an inch and an eighth steel bar sharp at one end, flattened and splayed by repeated blows of the hammer at the other. The hammer marks were still bright, showing recent use.

Hard Rock studied this for a moment and nodded vigorously. Then he laid it aside among a heap of old discarded drills and took another. The one he took was exactly like the other but only about half its length.

"By God," he muttered, "if I know anything of how men work this'll come damned near gettin' him."

Working swiftly he emptied his pockets of the dynamite sticks and lowered them very carefully one by one into the empty drill-hole. It held six sticks. Then on top of the last stick he dropped a few tiny bits of gravel and on top of that very gently lowered into place two of the fulminate of mercury caps.

That done—and he sweated over it, for he knew the risk he ran—he very delicately replaced the short iron drill so that the lower end rested on the upper copper cap that in turn was in contact with the dynamite.

The trap was complete. Whoever should hit that drill-head would never hit but one blow, and Hard Rock was sure that only one man knew of that glory hole. That was the man who had murdered Scotty Rames. When his work was done he scrambled down the slope to the old camp.

"Now for poor old Scotty," he said.

He led the frightened pony as close to the dead body as he could urge him, tied him to a bush and bandaged his eyes with an old ore-sack. He knew that all horses go crazy at sight and smell of blood.

Then another problem presented itself. Pintano was several days distant. He could never take Scotty a four-days' trip under a blazing desert sun.

He cut the bottom from an ore-sack, roughly sewed it to another and finally passed the double-length sack over the body. That done, the real work began—to get that long load on the scared horse. For more than an hour he coaxed and cursed and lifted and strained. Not till both man and horse were worn out did he succeed, but finally the long top-pack was lashed in place with a filled ore-sack to balance it and he was ready for his trip to Pintano.

All that day he tramped through a yellow dust storm that started as he left camp. Billowing dust-devils followed him and sat upon him and dust-spouts broke over him from time to time while masses of yellow tumbleweed drove like live things down wind. His neckerchief filled with dust and the bitter alkali cracked his lips and fingers. Finally the stubborn pony frankly turned tail to the wind and would go no farther.

The desert-wise wanderer of the foothills knew too much to try to urge the horse. He made a wretched camp at Bitter-root where, lacking fuel, he ate cold raw bacon and drank alkali water into which he dropped chollo buds to make it drinkable. Then finally he dropped into an uneasy sleep by the sacked body of his partner.

THE next day was worse than the first. A cold wind, the beginning of a three-day cycle, caught him as he broke camp and he nearly froze while tramping the baking sands that burned his feet while his head froze. His weary arms were nearly jerked from their sockets as the pony hung back at each step. Finally, as he scrambled up the steep slope of a long dry water course, the pony gave a sudden squeal and settled back, nearly pulling Hard Rock's arm from its socket.

The man turned with a bitter oath, seized the rope and scrambled to the lip of the arroyo as an answering whinny came up wind. The next moment his quick ears caught the *thud-thud* of shod hoofs; then two mounted men came around a hill-shoulder with a loaded pack-mule jangling easily behind them.

Hard Rock's hand went to his holsterless hip; then he remembered that he had no gun. The leading rider laughed at the gesture and threw up his hand in the peace sign used all over the Frontier.

"Maybe you can tell me how far it is to Pintano," he said.

"All o' forty miles," said Hard Rock. "An' damned tough miles at that. Mostly measured by a coyote with his tail out straight. Worse'n that if you was to be afoot like me."

He eyed the man closely and was frankly covetous of the blue roan he rode. The other man, riding a ewe-necked bay, was a Mexican. Hard Rock knew Pintano pretty well but he was sure he had never seen either man there.

"If you ain't got business you're a damn fool for goin' to Pintano fer pleasure," he said frankly. "Course it's none o' my business but I tell you right now, stranger, anyone who'd go to Pintano fer pleasure would likely go to hell fer comfort."

"Much obliged. I never saw Pintano in my life. That's why I asked. Well, I'll pull my freight. Can I do anything for you, friend?"

"If you kin spare me a li'l water," said Hard Rock, "I'll be much obliged." He glanced at his water-bag that hung flat and dry from the *aparejo* pommel.

Without a word the little hard-faced Mexican swung out of saddle, unhooked the desert water-bag from his own saddle and passed it to Hard Rock. The pack-pony with its gruesome load in the doubled ore-sack sidestepped and shook himself. The next moment the little Mexican leaping aside to avoid being trampled, saw what that pack saddle held and he almost dropped the canteen in his surprise.

The tall American gave one look at what had startled his companion. He gave a sharp oath and his hand dropped to his holster as he saw, thrusting out from the long sack on the jaded pack-pony, a human hand. Its gnarled and calloused fingers were curiously curved like claws of a bird of prey and it was sunburned to a deep rich saddle-color.

"What the hell is that?" demanded the American sharply.

Hard Rock gave but a casual glance at his own pony but his eyes hardened as they met those of his questioner. Without a word he tied the lead rope to a bush, unslung lash and sling rope and lowered the body of old Scotty Rames to the trail.

"That's the body of my partner, Scotty Rames," he said quietly. "Day before yesterday he was murdered up in the hills. We was workin' a claim when someone shot him from ambush."

His questioner rapped out a sharp oath. "Who did it?" he asked. "Are we back in old-time Frontier days? What'd you do?"

"Do? What in hell could I do?" demanded Hard Rock in a voice that broke. Two days of wind will play hell with a man's nerves and Hard Rock had loved old Scotty Rames. "Me and Scotty had hocked our guns in Pintano to raise cash to outfit with. We didn't have ary gun along because we was at work. We had took out some ore that looked pretty good and we had it sacked up. I was just about startin' for Pintano to have the ore assayed when somebody shot Scotty from ambush. I looked for trail sign but he left none.

"I got to cover an' saved my hide. Then I waited a bit and went back for the body. I started to take it to Pintano for report and investigation but . . . . Well,

stranger, after two days' travel I've about made up my mind that I'll have to bury him along the trail."

The American examined the sacked body and nodded.

"The sooner the better," he said grimly. "We'll help you."

HARD ROCK got a pick and shovel from his pack and set to work to dig a grave while the tall stranger drew his little brown-faced companion aside.

"Remember, Pedro," he said, "I'm not Phil Kynaston. I am Paul Kitts. I'm takin' that name because I carry my initials P.K. in silver on my gun. Let no one know my real name till I tell you. *Sabe usted?*"

"*Seguro, señor.* It is true that a closed mouth catches no flies," and Pedro seized the shovel and started helping Hard Rock while Phil bent again over the sacked body.

"Look here, my friend . . . . " Hard Rock turned at the tone. "What's your name? It's not my business, but I think a little talk will sort of open matters between us." And Phil grinned at the old prospector. "What's your name?"

Hard Rock Simms gave one comprehensive glance at the man. He could almost look through a mass of schist and see pure gold. He did that now.

"My name is Frank Simms," he said. "Down in this part o' the country they call me mostly Hard Rock Simms 'count o' my knowin' powder an' dynamite pretty good. It's like I told you, stranger. Me and old Scotty Rames have been partners for years. Everybody round here knows us."

"You said you pawned your guns to raise cash for an outfit. What kind of guns were they?"

"We both carried the same kind o' guns on account of savin' the trouble about ca'tridges. Forty-five Winchesters both. Why?"

"I found this in that dead body when I examined it." And Phil held out his cupped hand for Hard Rock's inspection. The old man's eyes focused on a white nickeled, steel-jacketed bullet. "This is a thirty-thirty," said Phil evenly. "It was against the front of his neck. The man was shot from the rear as he was bending over slightly. No doubt of that. You'd better keep this. It may come in handy if any investigation is made." And he tossed the bullet to Hard Rock, who examined it and dropped it into his pocket.

"I'd give a whole lot," he said grimly, "if I could get just one sight at two hundred yards at the man who done it."

"I don't suppose you jumped somebody's claim, eh?"

"I did not. We knew our business, me and old Scotty. Any other man's claim is as safe with us as if it was in a bank. As far as we knew we was workin' on open land. Scotty was shot from ambush like I told you and then the man got away. I never even seen him and he left no tracks. I know 'cause I looked for 'em when I went back for the body."

"Someone from Pintano may have followed you."

"I don't believe so, Pintano don't run to minin'. It's all cattle."

"Well . . . . Who else could it have been? Who else lives out here?"

"Out here?" Hard Rock flung a hand abroad. "Who would live in this hell-hole but snakes an' gophers with a road-runner er two chucked in? This land is all that's left of the free range," he said. "Over beyond them hills"—he flung a gesture at the forbidding line of the Espinazos crimsoning slowly under the sun—"lies the lands of old man Leo Crex. Down there"—his swinging hand swept to the South—"Sam Marks runs his cattle on the Lyin' Y Ranch. Between the two lies what's left of the old-time open range with the hills and hell-holes of the Bulso de Diablo chucked in like a wedge in hell's open door."

THEY laid the long sack in the trench that they had dug and after a muttered prayer that sounded like a potent curse from Hard Rock they filled in the grave.

"An' that," said Hard Rock as he smoothed down the earth, "is a better grave than most desert rats ever gits. Most likely it's better'n I'll have. Old Scotty had made two fortunes in his time and was chiseled outen both of 'em by friends. He'd rather have died like this than die on a poor farm. By gar," he said, "I'd give a lot to have old Scotty back. I'm goin' to get my gun back when I can and then I'm goin' to get track of the man who done this."

"Can that pony carry you?" asked Phil with a doubtful look at the pack-pony.

"He's got to," said Hard Rock succinctly. "I'll take only one ore-sack with me. Old Gray can make his assay from one sack just as good as from three. Wait a bit."

In ten minutes he rearranged his pack, swung his leg over the *aparejo* and dropped into line with Pedro and the pack-mule and they moved out on the trail to Pintano.

CHAPTER IV

"THIS IS MURDER!"

LEO CREX, sitting on the porch of the Delmonico, Pintano's big hotel, started to his feet in open-mouthed astonishment as he saw Hard Rock Simms swing out of saddle, tie his jaded horse to the tie-rack in front of Abe Gray's assaying office, shoulder a full ore-sack and disappear inside the building.

The cigarette that Leo Crex was rolling tore in his fingers and he felt a little flame at the back of his neck. He knew at once that he had overplayed his hand. He had figured that Hard Rock would need four days to get back to Pintano with that ore. He had never considered the possibility of the man's reducing his load and riding the jaded pony.

Hard Rock had brought that ore from the Bulso de Diablo to be assayed by Gray, and he had reached Pintano long before Crex had figured that he could arrive there. He knew well enough what any kind of an assay would show and he know too that Abe Gray was a great talker and would tell all that he knew. At any cost that man Hard Rock Simms must be muzzled before he could start talking! No human being must know where Simms got that ore.

He rose hastily, crammed his hat down on his head and headed swiftly for the courthouse, a big, imitation-stone affair in the middle of a sun-baked square. A dozen horses stamped at flies at the tie-rack as Crex stormed past them and entered the first door to his left that bore a huge, dirty tin sign that bore the legend:

SHERIFF'S OFFICE.

As Crex entered the room a big man seated at a dingy desk with his feet as high as his head moved that head to one side to see past his feet. To move the feet was too much work.

"Hello, Crex," he shouted as though Leo were a half mile distant. "What kin I do for you?"

Leo Crex knew Sheriff Simeon Girton well. Too well, in fact, for Girton's ease. They had had many dealings and from each Girton had emerged considerably poorer but no wiser. Crex threw his hat to the desk, kicked a chair forward, sat down and tilted the chair on its front legs.

"I've got some hurry-up business for you to 'tend to, Girton," he snapped. "I want it done like I say and in a damned big hurry too."

"I bet you have . . . . " Girton sighted carefully at a blue-bottle fly on a chair and drowned it. "Some replevin of stole cows, huh?"

"Cows, hell," said Crex. "This is murder. Hard Rock Simms killed old Scotty Rames, his partner. Two days ago I saw Simms shoot him up in the hills."

Girton's feet came down with a crash and he nearly swallowed a quarter-of-a-pound of best Cactus Cut-plug as he stared unbelievingly at the speaker.

"You know 'em both, don't you?" demanded Crex. "Those two old desert rats . . . . "

"Sure I know 'em," snapped Girton. "They've been partners fer more years'n I've lived. Partners don't kill partners, Crex."

"The hell they don't. I tell you I seen it done. I was ridin' in from my ranch at Trecientos when I heard a dynamite blast go off over in the hills and I seen the smoke risin'. I knew nobody had any business over there, so I trailed over to see who it was. I tell you I seen Hard Rock Simms shoot his partner, Scotty Rames. Let me tell you . . . . "

CREX talked for ten minutes and his heavy metallic voice rumbled like heavy surf on a sandy shore as he rammed home point after point by smashing one knotted fist home in the other palm. Disbelief passed into incredulity and then conviction dawned in Girton's eyes. Knowing the bond that existed between partners in the West, he was loath to believe, but when he had once been convinced that conviction was final.

"If you seen Hard Rock kill his part-

ner, why didn't you arrest him?" demanded the sheriff.

"You damned fool," said Crex, "I'd left my gun on my horse. Beside that I had reasons of my own."

"Kin you take me to the place where the body is?"

"Of course I kin but I ain't goin' to do it. That is, I'll take you there alone but I won't take any posse or anybody but you."

"You won't hey? We'll darned soon see about that. Even Leo Crex can't buck the law, I guess."

"I ain't buckin' the law. Don't forget I hold a seven-thousand-dollar mortgage on your home lot an' you've got a crippled daughter to look out fer."

That was true. Girton subsided, and Leo Crex went on:

"You'll do just like I tell you an' don't you fergit it. I tell you Hard Rock Simms and Scotty Rames was prospectin' in a part of the country where they hadn't ought to be—where I don't want nobody. See? If you take a posse over there where Hard Rock done his killin', they're bound to find what I don't want no man to find.

"See? If they do that, there'll be hell to pay. I'll take you over there alone. You kin git the body an' bring it back, but I won't have nobody else over there. I'm damned sure you'll be so kind as to agree to what I want, 'cause I happen to hold your pre-election note fer five thousand dollars secured by a seven-thousand-dollar mortgage on your home. How about it?"

"All right, I reckon."

Girton could not afford to antagonize Crex, and both men knew it.

"Where's this man Hard Rock Simms right now?" he asked.

"I seen him takin' a sack of ore into Abe Gray's assayin' office a bit ago," said Crex. "Now listen, Girton. I'll tell you exactly what I want done. You pinch Simms fer the murder of his partner. Hold Gray as a witness in case the district attorney wants him, and git that sack of ore. That's the big thing next to holdin' Simms. I want you to git hold of Hard Rock Simms and that sack of ore. See? If you fall down on this play you'll be damned sorry," he said crisply.

"Who the hell's goin' to miscue on a little thing like that?" demanded Girton in a desperate attempt to save his face.

Crex watched him go over to Gray's office and open the door. In less than five minutes Girton came out shepherding Hard Rock Simms and Abe Gray who carried a sack of ore on his shoulder. Crex could see Gray's lips moving and knew that it was not in prayer, but a glance at Hard Rock Simms's face filled Crex with surprise. Hard Rock's face was as hard as stone from which that name was derived and his usually smiling mouth was a straight line. Crex heard him talking as they came up the steps to the sheriff's office.

"O' course, sheriff, if Leo Crex says a thing's so, it must be so. I don't know much law, but I do know this. You say this man Crex swears he saw me shoot my partner, Scotty Rames. All right. It ain't worth while for me to deny it, but you got to produce the body to show that Scotty was actually killed. The law calls that the *corpus delicti*, sheriff. You don't know that, but you've always been a kind of damned fool. That's why you're sheriff.

"After that, you got to prove a motive and after that you got to prove that I done it. And after that if you haven't proved them all and got me locked up fer life I'm goin' after you an' I'll beat hell out o' you. That's the law. I know, 'cause I've broke it before. What's the motive fer me killin' my partner? I ask you that?"

Girton whirled on Gray with a question. "What's that ore worth?"

"I've only looked at a handful," said Gray combatively. "It takes time to make a quantitative an' qualitative analysis an'—"

Girton exploded. "That's right," he shouted. "You're as bad as a lawyer or a doctor on the witness stand. You just can't give a straight answer. You gotta fog yourself up with words. I ask you a simple question an' you answer me so no human bein' kin sabe what you say."

"It ain't my business to do a job that God Almighty quit on," snapped Gray. "Since He made you a damned fool, it'll be sacrilege fer me to improve on His job by tryin' to give you understandin'. All I got to say is that ore looks like the richest I ever saw."

"Where's your partner, Scotty Rames?" Girton whirled on Simms.

"You tell me," said Hard Rock genially. "Looks like I'm the accused. If I am,

I'll stand on my constitutional right of keepin' silent till I talk to my lawyer. By his own showin', Leo Crex ought to be able to tell you about Scotty Rames. He says he seen him last. Where is he? Wait a minute." He snatched his arm from Girton's grasp. "Here's a man I want to talk to."

He called to Phil, who was just leaving the bar of the Blue Front with Pedro at his heels.

"Hi there, Kitts," he shouted. "Come over here a minute, will you?"

PHIL crossed the street and was eyed suspiciously by Sheriff Girton. Something in that cold unsympathetic stare antagonized Phil and he felt the back of his neck suddenly grow warm.

"Do you know this here man?" demanded Girton, pointing to Hard Rock. "I'm arrestin' him for the murder of his partner."

"Oh. I see. Well, I rode all day with him and—"

"Huh. Mebbe you're mixed up with him at that," said Girton suspiciously.

"Maybe I am, but, if I were you, I'd be mighty slow about sayin' so."

There was a snap and a ring to the words that bade Girton beware, but he had taken his stand and, like most ignorant and obstinate men, he maintained it because he did not know how to abandon it.

"I'll just hold you as a witness along with Gray here and this man Simms," said Girton. "It's up to the prosecutin' attorney to say if he needs you. This man here, too." He turned on the astonished Pedro. "A greaser, huh! Right here we don't think a lot of men who hang out with greasers."

"I'm sorry to forfeit your good opinion," said Phil politely. "Of course you have warrants for your action, Mister Sheriff . . . ."

Girton tapped his gun, and Phil laughed.

"Only a fool'd question that warrant," he said lightly. "Who makes the charge?"

"Leo Crex," said Girton. "He's over in my office."

"I don't know him," said Phil. "If I'm bein' held as a witness to a thing I never saw I've got a right to know that a murder was really committed."

"I told you Crex says he seen it done."

"So you did. Then if this man Crex saw it done he must have been there. A question just occurs to me. Why couldn't this man Crex have done it himself?"

"You're too damned talkative," snapped Girton. "I'm a-holdin' all of you till Mister Crex gets the body for an autopsy."

"Señor," muttered Pedro, "in that case we are like to die in jail of old age."

But Phil motioned him to silence and turned to Girton.

"All right, sheriff," he said pleasantly. "Of course you know what you're doin'. Of course you know that I'll later bring suit against you for false arrest. That is, after Hard Rock Simms gets through with you. You know you're a damned fool, of course. Any child can tell you that much."

A quick flutter of the sheriff's left eyelid silenced Hard Rock, who was staring at him intently.

"I suppose you feel you've just got to lock us up for safekeeping till you see the district attorney and the coroner gives his verdict. By the way, my name is Kitts —Paul Kitts. I'd like to see this Mister Crex who has made the charge."

"Come on then," said Girton. "He's in my office."

The big sheriff led the way to the office and flung open the door. He strode into the room ahead of the prisoner.

"Here's the sack of ore," he said, dropping it on the floor. "I impounded that like you told me to. I'm lockin' these men up as witnesses like you said. Gray an' Simms an' these two strangers."

"You damned fool," Crex raved. Girton had let these men know by his speech that the arrest was engineered by himself, Crex. "I suppose you got to hold these men now you got 'em."

He was afraid of this action by Girton. He had only wanted Gray and Simms prevented from talking and to get hold of that ore-sack with the ore from the Bulso de Diablo. He fumed silently while Girton unhooked a big key from a nail.

"I'll take your guns," he said.

"Just a minute . . . ." Phil grinned at him. "What about our horses, Mister Sheriff? They haven't been fed yet."

"I'll look after your stock myself," said Crex. "Don't worry."

"That's what's troublin' me a whole lot," said Phil ingenuously. "I hear that's your specialty, Mister Crex—lookin' after other people's stock."

An evil light flamed in Leo Crex's eyes.

That was "fighting talk," but the man was unarmed and even Girton was a bad witness against him. Too, the words gave him a bit of a shock. Who was this man Kitts? Where had he come from? Why in hell had Girton been such a fool as to pick him up as a witness?

Girton tore a piece of paper from a pad and wrote an informal receipt that he thrust at Phil, who pocketed it jauntily.

"Now you can show us to our happy home," he said carelessly.

AS they trailed along the corridor behind the sheriff both Pedro and Hard Rock Simms eyed him uncertainly. Were they mistaken in the man? Pedro asked himself the question. He did not believe he had made a mistake yet . . . .

Then Pedro's dark eyes fell on Leo Crex and they were suddenly lit with a glare that there was no mistaking. His eyes flared and gleamed with a feral light that would have betrayed him instantly to the most casual observer. Then his gaze shifted to Phil who was smiling covertly. What did this new employer of his mean? Surely it was no light matter to be jailed as a witness to a murder when the charge was made by the most ruthless man in three states.

Girton, with Crex at his elbow, led the way along the corridor that went to the back building where the cage stood. That back building of adobe brick was built around all four sides of the iron-latticed cage and a four-foot passageway lay between the walls and the cage. The cage itself was a simple iron lattice-work that enclosed two big compartments simply furnished with two iron bunks and some heavy stools.

One of the cells was filled with three Mexicans who stood with their faces pressed against the cage-work watching the new prisoners being interned. At a table across the passageway from the main cell, a fat man slouched in a big chair. He ruminatively passed a huge quid of tobacco from side to side in his mouth and wiped its leakage on the hairy back of a huge hand without raising his eyes from a dirty paper-backed volume whose title shrieked to the world, " Night Life in Chicago" or "The Secrets of White Slavery Bared."

"Hi there, Dante!" Sheriff Girton slapped him on the back. "Wake up, Dante. We got some new boarders fer you."

Dante Alighieri Botts rose ponderously. He did not appreciate untimely interruptions when he was engaged in literary pursuits.

"Why in hell can't you wait till I see what happens to this girl," he wheezed. Then he recognized Girton. "Oh! Hello, sheriff. I thought it was Baynes with the grub fer them greasers. I was just settin' here thinkin'. Who you got here? Oh. I see. Abe Gray and Hard Rock Simms, eh? Two strangers, too. What they all been doin'?"

"Mr. Crex has sworn out a warrant chargin' Hard Rock here with the murder of Scotty Rames, his partner, and I'm a-holdin' these others as witnesses till we see what the district attorney wants done with 'em. The strangers are only witnesses—so far."

Those last two words were all that was needed to harden the resolve that Phil had already made. If Ben Crocker was right, this man Crex had been looting the Lying Y Ranch for years in partnership with Sam Marks, the manager of the ranch.

If these jail doors ever closed on him, Phil, even as a mere witness in a murder case, he would not have even a fool's chance to investigate the looting of the Lying Y. Then another thought came to him. He glanced at Hard Rock Simms. He had known him for only a short time. He had had scant opportunity to form an opinion of the man, but it came to him like a blow that if he had ever seen utter honesty and integrity written on a man's face, it was on that of the grim old prospector. And he stood accused of the most heinous crime the West knows—the murder of his old partner.

Hard Rock had told a straight tale, but someone had shot Scotty Rames. Phil had seen the body and he knew that Hard Rock carried no gun . . . .

"UNLOCK that cell door," growled Girton.

Dante Alighieri Botts uncoiled himself, slowly unlocked the ponderous lock and flung the door wide open.

"Inside with you," snapped Girton with a wave of his hand at Phil.

"One minute, Mister Sheriff. I'd like a word with Mister Crex. He seems to be the brains of this bunch."

Undoubtedly politeness is the oil of social life. Leo Crex stepped forward, hurled Pedro aside and stepped to Phil's side immediately in front of the open door of the cell. Girton stood squarely before that door with a hand hooked in his belt, the other hand on the door. Botts was half inside the cage waiting for the men to enter. The next moment it happened and it happened so quickly that the eye could not follow.

Phil thrust a foot before Leo Crex. Then he seized the burly ranchman by the throat and fairly hurled him across his outstretched foot into the cage. Crex stumbled over the foot. Then he staggered, crashed, and before he could realize what had happened, Sheriff Girton, his gun snatched from its holster and thrown back across the corridor, crashed into him and knocked him flat again. To cap it all, Dante Alighieri Botts executing a *pas seul* like a whirling dervish, pirouetted heavily across the cage and fell over the pair. Then the cage door crashed heavily shut, the lock clicked into place and a shrill yell of joy rose from the next cage where the three Mexican prisoners stood with their faces held to the lattice-work.

Phil glanced at them and motioned to Pedro. "Tell 'em to shut up, Pedro," he said. "I'll let 'em out in a minute."

Pedro stepped to the door and spoke. The three men subsided while Phil sorted out a key from a huge bunch that Botts had dropped in the corridor. He fitted the key to the lock while Pedro explained.

"Señor, they say the sheriff arrested them merely as vagrants. They say he is paid forty cents a day to feed each prisoner, so he needs to keep the jail full to make a living. He pays eight cents a day to feed each prisoner for whom he is paid forty. See?"

"Good. Tell 'em I need three men. Have they got jobs?"

"No, señor. They say they seek work."

"They need seek no further. One minute, Pedro . . . ."

Phil drew Hard Rock and Abe Gray aside. "You two listen to me," he said. "I'm turnin' these three Mexicans loose and I'm leavin' Girton with Crex an' the turnkey locked up, to give us a start.

"And listen to me, Gray—that man Scotty Rames was killed, all right. I saw the body after he had been shot. Simms here had no gun. Of course men might say that he shot his partner and then threw his gun away. I don't believe it. Will you keep yer mouth shut about his killin', Gray, till I give you word to talk?"

"Sure I will," said Gray. "They only want me as a witness about the ore. I ain't charged with anything. I won't run away. I'll be here when you want me."

"Good!" Phil turned to Hard Rock. "You and I'll be marked men," he said. "You stand charged with murder and I'll be charged with jail breakin'. As soon as the sheriff gets loose, sure as hell, he'll have a posse on our trail—if he can find it. Pedro, I want those three men to come with me. I'll try not to land them in any serious trouble. Ask them if they'll come with me for a dollar a day. Have they horses?"

Pedro asked and turned, grinning.

"They say they will walk over hot rocks for you, señor. They say their horses are in the shed back of this jail. The sheriff charges a dollar a day for horse keep and keeps the men locked up till they pay."

"I see. He's a financier of sorts. We'll get to the office now. Just one word—Simms . . . ." He faced Hard Rock and his lips set in the dim light. Then he whirled Hard Rock to face him. "Listen to me, Simms. As God is your judge and mine, did you do this thing of which you stand accused? I believe you to be as innocent as I am, but I must have your assurance."

"You mean that you'll believe what I tell you?" demanded Hard Rock. There was a curious thrill to his voice that Phil did not miss.

"I reckon I know a man when I see one. What do you say?"

"I told you the truth," said Hard Rock. "I'll tell you more. Sooner or later I'll strike the trail of the man who killed Scotty Rames and I'll foller him into hellfire to git him. Till then I stay with you. Who in hell are you anyway, young feller?"

"You'll know in time," Phil laughed. "In the meantime—does anyone know a good place for us to hide out a spell? Just as soon as this fool sheriff gets loose he's sure to have a posse after us and we'll have to hide a bit. First of all let's get to the office."

With the wondering men trailing at his heels, Phil slammed open the office

door and silently pointed to the gun racks. From those racks Hard Rock and the Mexicans helped themselves while Phil and Pedro retrieved their own guns.

"Now for the horses. They're tied in the sheriff's shed yonder. Saddle up at once and wait in the shed till I come. Pedro, you go to one of the stores and buy what grub we need for six men. I'll wait here in the shed for you. Hurry."

In twenty minutes Pedro was back with the pack-mule groaning under a load of beans and bacon, flour and coffee, and Phil gathered his men behind the jail heedless of the muffled shouts that came from the cells.

"They'll be all right till daylight," he said quietly. "The more noise they make the more sure it is that they'll be taken for a lot of drunks locked up overnight. The big question is, where do we go from here? Who knows the country here? I don't."

"The question is how long do you want to hide?" said Hard Rock. And he eyed Phil from unwinking eyes.

"All right. I'll tell you this much. I've got to be where I can keep an eye on the happenin's of the Lying Y Ranch," said Phil shortly. "I'll explain later."

"You don't need to." Hard Rock nodded grimly. "I know just the place. Twin Caves. Not a man in a hundred knows of 'em. They're a short five miles from the ranch house of the Lyin' Y. Nobody'll ever dream of anyone hidin' so close even if they know the caves. They'll never guess we're there."

"We? Did you say 'we'?" demanded Phil.

"Where I land, I stick," quoth Hard Rock slowly. "We'd better ride out of town to the west and then cut around full circle to throw Girton off our trail when he gits out."

They mounted and rode slowly out of Pintano by the trail to the west and were suddenly swallowed up in the dust wreaths of the desert.

CHAPTER V

"GOLD IN THE ESPINAZOS!"

WALTER CREX, riding up Pintano's main street, jerked his horse to a stop outside the jail and cocked his head toward the door. Frenzied shouts and curses riddled the hot air and the atmosphere seemed faintly blue.

"Sounds like an election party inside," he muttered. "I wonder what's up."

He swung out of saddle, left his reins hanging and strode up the steps and stood for a moment in the door.

Walter Crex was as burly as his father with the same unprepossessing exterior. The same light-colored "killer's eyes" stared unwinkingly. There was, too, a distinct air of sensuality that hovered about him so that people coming in contact with him felt they had been in touch with something that was morally dirty. He listened for a moment at the jail door and then quickly entered the place.

For a moment the half-dusk blinded him, then he was suddenly aware of his father standing inside the locked cell with his angry face pressed against the bars while he cursed everything in sight and hearing. Behind Leo Crex, Girton raved profanely and Walter could see Dante Alighieri Botts calmly stretched out on a steel cot smoking a cigarette. Walter's eyes took in the scene and he grinned.

"Hello, Pap," he hailed. "They got you at last, did they? Who done it an' what you all been doin'? Got all three o' you on the right side o' the bars at last, have they?"

"You think you're damned funny," snarled his father. "We was coaxed in here last night by a damned road agent that that damned fool Girton tried to arrest. The men got us to come inside the place an' locked the door . . . . " (Even to himself Leo Crex would not admit the simplicity of the plan that led to his incarceration). "We been here all night without a drop to drink or a thing to eat. Git the key and let us out, I tell you."

But that was easier said than done. Sheriff Girton himself had provided for that cell an ancient lock so ponderous and so simple as to defy picking. It was a huge steel contraption as big as a dinner plate and at least an inch thick and it locked on a thick chain run through the door. Phil, with a devilish caution, moreover, had thrown away the key. Walter Crex sweated over that lock with impatient profanity and finally gave up in disgust.

"I can't pick that damned lock," he said. "I'll have to get the smith."

"What? An' let the whole damned town know your father an' the sheriff with the turnkey was locked in the cells by the

man they was arrestin'?" demanded Girton amazedly. "No you don't. You go to my office an' git a hack-saw from the desk drawer. They're there—if them devils didn't think of takin' 'em."

In twenty minutes Walter was back with the tools, but even then progress was slow. The hack-saw was old and rusty and could not be trifled with and the file was worn almost smooth. Also the lock was case-hardened. They cursed steadily for two mortal hours while the rusty saw-blade whined and bent and the sun was almost down when the lock finally gave way.

Without a word Girton headed for the office with the others at his heels. Walter Crex, who remained to scoff, knew better than to say a word. To jest now was to play with dynamite. The three big men stormed into the office with Walter at their heels and stood aghast at sight of the looted gun racks; then Girton, first to recover, swore gustily.

He stormed, "They've stole the guns I arm my posses with. I'll have one hell of a time explainin'. That man's released them three greasers and armed 'em, too!" He leaped to the window which gave on the yard behind the jail. "The horses is gone, too," he said.

"Horses, hell!" Leo Crex hunted frantically about the office. "Guns don't matter, nor horses either. The hell of it is, they've got that sack of ore and by this time Abe Gray knows all about it and Hard Rock Simms is loose."

"I kin tend to Gray if I have to," said Walter Crex. He seized his father by the arm and drew him aside. "I come over in a hurry to git you," he said. "Sam Marks sent a letter over to you. Red Dyer brung it. I don't know how come him to miss you. He got to Trecientos after you left there. I read it. It's a mighty important message. . . ."

"Well? What is it?"

"I opened it," said Walter, "an' I read it. Sam Marks wrote you that he had just had a letter from a girl named Ellen Mathis. She enclosed a copy of old man Henry Peters' will. It seems like old man Peters died and left the Lyin' Y half to this here girl named Mathis and half to a maverick named Kynaston. The Mathis girl wrote Sam that she's on her way out to the Lyin' Y an'll git there on the eighteenth . . . ."

His father nodded. "I know all that," he said. "I saw Sam. I don't see how Dyer missed me on the trail. You say it was Dyer?"

"Yeah. Red Dyer from the Lyin' Y. I know him well."

"He must ha' passed me while I was over investigatin' that dynamite blast. I seen that man Hard Rock Simms shoot his partner, Scotty Rames. Them two men found the Devil's Pocket."

WALTER CREX let slip a sharp oath and stood staring at his iron-faced father and his eyes focused into tiny points of light.

"They had packed some ore on a pony and was arguin' about it," said Crex; "then Simms all of a sudden up and shot Scotty Rames. I'd left my gun on my saddle, so I couldn't do nothin'."

A few men might have accepted that statement at its face value, but Walter Crex knew his father. He knew his shifty evasiveness and he knew that Leo Crex would never have crossed the dark and forbidding ranges of the Espinazos without a gun. No more than he would have entered naked a pit full of cougars. He coolly eyed his father, who went on:

"I rode down to the Lyin' Y to see Sam Marks at once. Then I came in here and told Girton what I seen and he pinched Hard Rock Simms and the others as witnesses and he took away the sack of ore from Gray. If Gray had been able to make that assay for Simms there might have been trouble for us. We don't want any public attention till after Sam has shipped us the last of the cattle offen the Lyin' Y. I want every head of cattle across the pass before that girl shows up at the Lyin' Y."

"I begin to see," said Walter.

"I'm plumb glad o' that," said his father with labored courtesy. "Marks kin rustle four or five thousand head o' cattle, he tells me. Once we git that bunch acrost the pass their brands will change mighty quick. Sam Marks has give orders already for his men to do it."

Walter said nothing. He contented himself with a little grunt that might mean anything.

"I got a job fer you," said his father. "You'll stay here in town till the eighteenth. You'll meet that Mathis girl when she comes and you'll bring her over to Trecientos. Let her think she's comin' to the Lyin' Y. We got to keep her out o' the

way till Marks gets them five thousand cattle fer us. Bring the girl over to Trecientos. See?"

"You know what you're doin'?" demanded Walter. "That comes mighty close to kidnapin' and that's a capital offense out here."

"The hell you say," said his father ironically. "Maybe cattle stealin', murder and wild-cattin' a mine that don't belong to you is all Sunday School jobs at that.

"All you got to do is to git a buckboard at the hotel, meet the girl, tell her you're takin' her to the Lyin' Y and then drive her over to Trecientos. I'll do the rest. By the way, be sure you bring her to the old ranch house. See? Then she'll never be able to say she was taken to the place where we live."

"All right. What then?"

"While she's at Trecientos," said his father, "every head o' horned cattle will be lifted offen the Lyin' Y ranges, their brands changed to the Bar Chevron. When that fool girl gits back to the Lyin' Y she'll find a lot o' land and that's all. Boy, it's like pickin' piñon nuts. If a man picked them piñon nuts one at a time he'd never git a lot. The way to gather nuts is the way the Navajos do. Watch the gophers and the squirrels and then when you want nuts go rob the squirrels' holes. We'll do the same. That girl owns half the Lyin' Y Ranch."

"Who owns the other half?"

"A fool named Kynaston. Nobody knows who er where he is and it makes no difference to me. That's why Sam Marks is so willin' to make this last big clean-up of the Lyin' Y. He may never get another chance. Sam thought he was fixed fer life as manager of the Lyin' Y. He's as mad as a wet hen about it."

"That's all right," commented Walter, "but suppose this man Kynaston turns up some day?"

"He'll only be too late," said Crex, grinning. "The time to git cracklin' meat is when the hogs is bein' killed. If you come late to the killin' you git no meat. He's comin' late. But that ain't what's botherin' me right now. Them cattle is a big item, but there's a thing that's a lot bigger. It's this here Hard Rock Simms matter."

"What d'you mean?" asked his son.

"It's thisaway." Crex's voice almost broke. "Hard Rock Simms got that ore from the Bulso de Diablo, where we've been takin' out ore fer years. O' course we got that sack of ore from Gray before he had time to make an assay, but nobody knows what Simms told him.

"If Gray or Hard Rock Simms knows an' tells what that Devil's Pocket holds, we'll lose not only the mine but all hope of makin' money offen the Lyin' Y. I tell you right now, that mine in the Bulso de Diablo is worth ten ranches even like Trecientos and Lyin' Y. I wish to heck I could lay hands on that man Sturton, who owns the scrip to that land."

"You might advertise fer him," suggested Walter.

"Can't. I'm afeard to. He'd get wise to the value of the place."

"You might file on some claims yourself. That'd tie it up in the courts."

"Yes, and everybody'd know all about it. When we got through the lawyers'd have it all. That man Sturton's got three years yet to make his payment of fifteen cents an acre fer that tract."

"I see. Well—there's always one way out."

"If you kin see one you got better eyes'n me. What is it?"

"How much money does Lynn Davis, the county surveyor, owe you?"

"He owes me some money, but a lot more'n that. He's drunk most o' the time. I saved his hide fer him the time he lost his notebook when the State was tryin' to establish its claim to the Verner tract. He'd have lost his job if he'd lost that notebook. In actual cash he owes me about two thousand dollars—usual security o' course. A mortgage on his shack here in Pintano."

"Yeah." Walter grinned. "An' him with a sick wife at a sanitarium. Don't you see? You've got it sewed up. You see Davis an' tell him you want to git that Bulso de Diablo tract fer a place to winter cattle. No survey's been made fer years.

"You file a claim that the line of Trecientos as originally run included the Bulso de Diablo tract. Then Sturton will have to prove that it don't. Davis'll make the survey. I reckon with the hold you've got on him you kin make him throw the line a little bit to one side so the Bulso de Diablo tract'll fall inside the Trecientos lines."

"By Jehosophat," said Leo Crex sharply, "I believe you've hit it. I'll see Davis.

A man kin play a lot o' tricks with a compass. Here's Girton. Let's hear what he's got to say."

Girton was red with wrath as he strode up to them.

"Well," he snorted, pointing to the ore-sack, "I'm damned glad to see somebody's got what they want. I'm raisin' a posse right away. I'm goin' to pick up the trail o' that bunch an' round 'em all up. They can't git away with what they done."

"Git after 'em right away," snapped Crex. "You needn't worry over Gray. He won't run away. He's on'y wanted as a witness. He's no fool."

LEO CREX was right. Abe Gray was no fool and the moment Crex insisted on Girton impounding that ore-sack, Gray knew at once that sack was important. He put two and two together and found in this case it made four. The moment Hard Rock Simms had handed Gray that sack the grizzled little assayer had taken a big double handful of the red earth from the open mouth of the sack and that earth still lay on his iron-topped table. The moment he saw the departing backs of Phil and his men as they clattered out of Pintano, Gray headed for his office. He was sure he would not be disturbed again.

He hurried into the workshop behind his office, laid the ore on a table and divided it into two equal parts. One of these parts he laid aside, the other he slowly and methodically worked over till he got a yellowish sand in the bottom of his receptacle. He gave one casual look at that sand, spread some on the ball of his thumb and let go a great whistle. Then he almost leaped for the other pile of ore that he had laid aside.

That heap was composed mostly of chunks the size of a man's hand and Gray's eyes gleamed like live coals as he snatched the biggest and turned it over and over in the sunlight. Then he almost dropped it.

"Good Lord," he whispered hoarsely. "Wire gold! . . . Free millin', too. Holy cat! Was there ever ore like this since the days o' French Creek and the Blind Alley? No wonder Leo Crex didn't want anyone to know what Hard Rock Simms and poor little Scotty Rames found in the hills. The question is, where did they find it? I'd give a whole lot to know that. Let's see what's what."

He laid that nugget on an iron plate and smote it cunningly with a hammer till it fell apart like a cracked nut and his heart leaped at what he saw.

Little lines of yellow wire-gold led off from the center like yellow cobwebs and beads and small pellets of reddish-yellow metal clung like dried sweat-drops to the face of the stone as a little rivulet of reddish dust followed the hammer-head as he withdrew it.

"My stars," he muttered, "my fortune's made!"

HE did not care where that gold had come from; that was not his business. Gray knew too much to allow himself to be bitten with the prospector's fever. He had seen too many men go "haywire" over iron pyrites. Finding gold was other men's job. His business was assaying and proving and testing what other men found.

"I can't lose," he muttered, "but first of all I've got to get word to the outside world."

That was easy. A telegram to Ben Stillwell, the A.P. man at Ratledge would insure publicity and would start the ball rolling. After that the story would spread itself. Stillwell had known Abe Gray for years and he would know that Gray did not "bark at knots."

Moreover, Stillwell was a Western man, a graduate of the Boulder School of Mines, and, more than any stranger, would appreciate what this news would mean. It was cataclysmic!

"I'll get word to old Ben right away," he muttered.

He snatched his hat and headed for the telegraph office and almost jerked the operator from his dinner that he had spread on an old newspaper on the shelf.

"Hi, Jimmy," he said, "gi' me a dozen forms. I got a real message for you."

He took the forms and sucked audibly at his pencil for thoughts that came with difficulty; then he began to write frenziedly. He realized that he could give but few actual facts but when gold is the theme men do not want facts. They want the stuff that dreams are made of.

Sheet after sheet was filled and thrust across the counter to the wide-eyed Jimmy Opper till finally he too took fire from the written word. Then he dropped to his instrument and sent his message shivering out along the wires.

GOLD IN THE ESPINAZOS

That was Gray's text and like many a less eloquent preacher who has set the world afire with lesser news, he enlarged upon it by frequent repetition.

"The finding of gold in the Espinazos," he wrote, "proves the truth of the age-old prophecies. Gold is here and such gold! I have this day assayed a specimen that runs more than three thousand dollars to the ton and I am told a whole mountain is in sight. If you care to take a gambler's chance, come on out."

That message clicked and rattled its way through a dozen relays before Stillwell picked it hot off the wires at Ratledge and, while he sat, chin in hand, reading it, men in a score of towns were hurriedly planning their departure and checking over their cash. Burros, of course. Burros cost fifty cents each! Bacon was eighteen cents a pound. Giant powder was thirty cents a pound. Picks weighed five pounds. A man needed one pick to two shovels. But . . . . Gold was twenty-two dollars an ounce, and all a man had to do in that Espinazo country was to scrape the gold with a hoe from every water-course.

Gold in the Espinazos! The word ran from town to town and the rumor grew in the running as a snowball grows by rolling downhill. Two miners had found an abandoned ore-lead . . . ! A drunken Mexican muleteer seeking a rock to throw at his team had uncovered a vein of fabulous wealth . . . ! Gold in the Espinazos.

And the country went wild over the word.

CHAPTER VI

ENEMIES MEET UP

"THERE'S the Lyin' Y ranch house. Back your pony down the hill so your head won't show against the skyline. No sense takin' chances."

Hard Rock Simms halted on a low slope and pointed. Below them on the flat plain, surrounded by huge live-oaks and windmills that upthrust like needles, the white buildings of the Lying Y Ranch stood out like a village.

Phil eyed them all while his men loafed in their saddles behind him and the pack-mule snatched eagerly at the beans on a mesquite bush. Ranch house, storehouses, bunkhouse and corrals—he eyed them all and then his gaze wandered over mile after mile of grassland on which prickly-pear and chollo, ocatilla and mesquite pricked out dark figures.

"It's a five-acre land," he muttered. That meant that every five acres would support one cow—a rich cow country indeed, if he was right. "I see now what old Ben Crocker meant. This land will sure keep cattle, but they've got to be fattened up for a quick sale. A man ought not to go busted here with any luck at all. . . . . What about water?" he asked suddenly of Hard Rock, who was moodily watching him.

"You kin git water anywhere in the Amargo Valley from six to forty feet," said Hard Rock. "That's why he's got them windmills."

Phil fell to studying the land again and the iron-faced old prospector studied him. Finally Phil, sensing the examination, turned.

"Well," he said quizzically, "what's bitin' you, old-timer?"

"This," said Hard Rock. "I was just a-wonderin' if you know what you're a-doin'? There ain't no sense in you gettin' mixed up with me.

"Right now I stand accused of havin' murdered my partner and just as soon as Girton an' Crex git out o' jail they'll have a posse huntin' our trail. If they don't ketch us in a week, there'll be a reward fer us dead er alive. You've been a good friend to me and I'd hate to see you git in hot water over me."

"I'm in it right now up to my withers," Phil laughed. "Is it any joke to lock up in their own jail the sheriff and the turnkey and to turn loose three prisoners? To say nothin' of old man Crex? Don't you fool yourself. They'll want each man of us and I don't mean 'em to get us. Listen to me, Simms. I'm comin' clean with you. What's my name?"

"Paul Kitts," said Hard Rock cautiously. "An' you've got 'P.K.' on your gun to prove it."

"My name is Philip Kynaston," said Phil. "Henry Peters, who owned the Lyin' Y Ranch, died and left it half to me and half to a girl named Ellen Mathis. I heard there were some queer doin's down here on the Lyin' Y and I was advised if I wanted to find out to take an assumed name."

"You was damn well advised," said Hard Rock. "Sam Marks is as crooked

as a side-winder's trail. I been prospectin' in this country a good many years, Kynaston—since that's your name—an' I never talked about other men's business 'cause it don't pay. But I've seen Marks's men doin' a slew o' things that would have hung 'em before any cattle-men's jury in the land. I wasn't interested and I didn't keer, but I do now."

"What kind of things?" demanded Phil.

"Bein' damned generous in swappin' brands fer one thing. Breedin' outbreed cows to Lyin' Y bulls fer another. Shiftin' cows out o' season to get 'em in reach of men of the Bar Chevron and the Bar-Diamond-Bar, fer another thing. Ever hear of them two brands?"

Phil remembered those sketches that Crocker had made and nodded.

"That's all," said Hard Rock. "A 'nod's as good as a wink to a blind horse.' There's Twin Caves over yonder," he said. "We better ride spread out here so we won't leave a marked trail. It'd be hell to have Girton an' Crex stumble on us with a posse when we're in them caves. See them two dark spots on the rock-face? They're the caves."

They had turned down a narrow canyon whose walls were almost sheer. The bottom was filled with huge boulders between which aspens and red willows formed a thick tangle. Mesquite grass grew about every clump and the rocks were dark with water moss.

"Up there—" Hard Rock pointed to two narrow trails that led from the canyon into the sidehill brush. They twisted and turned up the cliff toward those dark spots, and Phil saw at once what a perfect hiding place it was.

JUST below the mesa that topped the canyon a shelf of rock overhung the caves, sheltering them entirely from any view from above. They got the ponies and the pack-mule up the tortuous path and at the entrance to the caves found themselves standing on a narrow bench some twenty feet wide. The only access to those caves was by the trails by which they came. Sight from above was cut off by the rocky overhang and the bench in front cut off all view from the floor of the canyon. Only from across the canyon at precisely the same level could a view of the caves be had.

Twin entrances, a score of feet apart, joined under the rock into one great cave and a little trickle of water in one of the entrances formed a pool before it ran over the edge of the bench.

"Put the horses in the dry part," said Phil. "If they're near the water they may whinny. What're the names of our new friends, Hard Rock?"

"Zeno and Porfirio Altez an' Primo Lopez," said Hard Rock. "Zeno tells me he worked once over on the Trecientos. If he did, I don't see how he got loose. I hear old man Crex runs a regular poor-farm over there. When a man once gits on Trecientos he stays there.

"Girton will be like a mad dog to find us," he said moodily. "But I can't quite figger Crex. I can't see why he tried to swear that killin' of old Scotty on me unless he's the man what dug that 'ere glory hole."

"What glory hole? What're you talkin' about?"

Hard Rock told him with pointed profanity.

"When he says I shot old Scotty, he's a damned old liar. But don't forget this—old Crex does nothin' without a purpose. He said he *saw* me shoot Scotty. All right! Then, if he saw me, he must have been there. There was two of us there, and by gar, I didn't shoot my own partner."

"Then Crex did it," said Phil. "But we'll have one hell of a time proving it. I'm goin' to go in to Pintano in the mornin'. I'll see if I can discover anything there."

"If you barge into Pintano," said Hard Rock, "they'll jail you."

"I don't think so. In the first place that man Girton is certainly outside of Pintano huntin' for our trail. I'll take Zeno along with me. We've got good horses and if we do strike Girton, he and his ponies will be tired out. I'll be careful, though."

They left at early dawn and, with Zeno leading the pack-mule, they threaded the deep canyon and worked out upon the flat and headed southward for Pintano.

MILE after mile they laid behind them. The wooded arroyos gave place to the wide-spreading levels covered with succulent mesquite grass and the coarse palma grass that rose in yellow billows to their *tapideros* as they rode.

Mirage after mirage swept across the plains as the sun rose and afar they saw the reflection of a lake where they knew no lake was. A narrow white line under it was the only indication that it was a mirage and no real pond. Presently as they topped a low divide Zeno snapped his fingers as one does on sighting game.

"There, señor," he said in a low, tense whisper. "Yonder is the stuff to fatten cattle. And there are the cattle."

Phil's eyes followed Zeno's pointing finger to four cows and a calf standing for coolness in the shade of a mesquite clump. He stared casually, then his stare widened and his lips set.

"I think I'll look a little closer there, Zeno," he said. "Come on."

"Seguro, señor." And the pliant little Mexican whirled his pony toward the cows. Pulling their horses to a walk they rode leisurely enough to the cows that stood staring stolidly at them.

"Look there, Zeno." Phil pointed to a cow that carried the brand of the Lying Y at full length on her hip. It was as plain as though done in black paint. "That's an old mark, Zeno. It was too plain to be fooled with. They didn't dare monkey with a well marked brand like that, but look at the calf."

The calf plunged at the cow's flanks butting and bawling for its natural rights. The cow turned her head and tried to lick the face of the struggling calf shivering a little as the calf butted at the full udder. A sudden sharp oath from Phil made even Zeno jump.

"Look at that calf, Zeno," he said sharply. "Look at its tongue! The tongue has been split."

But Zeno had no need to give more than a casual glance. The crusted blood black and congealed in the corners of the calf's mouth told a plain tale; a tale old as the hills in cow-land.

Someone desiring to brand that calf had slit its tongue. A cow will suckle only her own calf. The slit tongue would prevent that calf from sucking at a Lying Y cow and in a few days, compelled to seek its own support the calf, unbranded, would be the prey of whoever chose to slap a brand on it. An unbranded, unidentified calf is fair game for whoever takes it.

"Plain damned stealing," commented Phil. "All right. Now we know one thing that is bein' done on the Lyin' Y ranges. The question is, who did it?"

"It is three days old, señor," said Zeno.

"Aye. All of that. Come on, Zeno. Let's hit the trail."

They pulled out on the Pintano trail and Phil rode deep in thought. This was one reason why the Lying Y was "in the red." It began to look as though old Ben Crocker had been correct in what he said.

PINTANO sweated in the noonday heat as they jogged down the long street. Phil took few precautions against discovery. He felt sure that Girton and his men would have left town on a hunt for him and except for pulling his thick neckerchief up about his mouth, he attempted no disguise.

"We'll stop here, Zeno," he said when they reached the square. "I see a good-sized general store there. You get what supplies you need and pack the mule and wait for me. I want to get some ammunition."

While Zeno went into the store for his supplies Phil strode halfway down the block to where a great placard announced that Jerry Plack dealt in "guns, hams and accessories." Plack, hanging over an empty box, came to life at Phil's request.

"Forty-five rifle ammunition? Sure. I got all kinds of it. How many?"

"Two hundred. By the way"—a sudden thought occurred to him—"Do you happen to have any used rifles for sale?"

"Huh! That's a right funny question in this place," said Mister Plack. "Out here, you know, a man uses his own guns. As a rule he don't sell it. It jest happens that I have a couple o' used guns that the owners will not need any more. I may as well sell 'em, I reckon, and git what I kin outen the shuffle. Here they air."

He picked two rifles from a case and laid them on the counter, and while Phil examined them carefully, Plack, glad of a listener, talked.

"You've probably heard the talk about town," he said. "Sheriff Sam Girton arrested a prospector named Hard Rock Simms on a charge of havin' shot his partner, Scotty Rames. It seems that Hard Rock got out o' jail an' took along with him a stranger and three Mexicans. All Pintano's wonderin' what'll happen.

"Girton left town this mornin' swearin' he'll keep the trail till he gits his men.

One thing's sure. Old Hard Rock can't git very far away. He's on'y got one pack-pony and neither him nor the others have got guns." (Phil knew by that that Girton's vanity had prevented him from making public the looting of the gun-racks and the stables.)

"What?" Plack asked in answer to a question from Phil. "How do I know Hard Rock and his men ain't got guns? I know Hard Rock ain't got a gun 'cause that's his gun you got your paws on right now. Him and old Scotty Rames had no money to buy supplies with, so I loaned 'em twenty dollars on their two guns. They was plumb busted."

"You say this man Hard Rock Simms is charged with havin' shot his partner," said Phil in a puzzled voice. "If he hocked his gun with you, what'd he shoot Rames with?"

"A hell of a lot o' people are wonderin' over that too, Stranger. An' up to date there ain't been no satisfactory answer. You know Leo Crex?"

"It seems to me I've heard the name," said Phil noncommittally.

"You're sure playin' in big luck if that's all you know," said Mister Plack confidentially. "Leo Crex came in, I hear, an' swore he seen Hard Rock Simms shoot Scotty Rames. A whole lot o' people don't quite believe it, 'cause the two men was partners.

"Crex said Hard Rock shot him with a rifle. I know better. I know Hard Rock didn't have no rifle. I had it. It'll all come out when they get the body. I figger it'll raise a leetle bit o' hell fer Crex. That's what I'm waitin' fer. You want to buy it?"

"I believe I'll take it." Phil lifted the rifle. The walnut stock shone with a lustre that bespoke loving care. It was plain that that rifle was more than a tool. It was an old friend. He knew Hard Rock would like to have it back and he felt that he owed the old man a debt for having doubted him even for a moment. He took the gun and paid for it. "What reason is the man Simms supposed to have had for killing his partner?" he asked.

"Heaven only knows," said Mister Plack piously. He followed Phil to the door and at sight of two men standing in hot debate before the open door of the Malpais Saloon across the street he leaped into life.

"Mind the store fer me fer a minute, will you, Stranger?" he shouted, and seized Phil by the arm. "I'll not be gone a minute. I got to see Tony Lyman over yonder about some wire fencin'." And before Phil could refuse to wait, Plack was across the street and Phil heard his voice raised in hearty profanity.

"Damn yore shiftlessness, Lyman," he shouted. "You put me in a nice mess. I let you have a lot o' rabbit fencin' on yore promise to pay in thirty days. It's been sixty days now an' I ain't saw the color o' yore money—"

The rest was lost, but Phil caught a fragment of the reply.

"Hell, man! Somebody stole the fencin'. You sent the wire out with a lot o' patent fence posts and you didn't send ary post-hole. How'n hell am I goin' to stick a fence post in without a hole? Come inside, you ol' skinflint, an' we'll have a drink."

THE slatted door of the Malpais slammed behind them and for five minutes Phil waited impatiently against his will, hardly knowing why he waited at all. Then he realized that he must not delay. Zeno was already waiting for him with the mule.

He picked up the heavy package of ammunition and started for the door just as it swung open and a man suddenly crashed into him like an avalanche gone crazy. Phil staggered aside as the man with a blistering curse raised his head and Phil found himself staring into the angry face of—Leo Crex!

With an inarticulate roar Crex dropped his hand toward his open holster. The memory of the day before rankled like salt on a raw cut and he went for his gun. Went for it but never reached it.

Phil lost no time over his gun. There was no time for that. He lashed out with his right hand that held that heavy box of ammunition and he caught Leo Crex squarely on the chin.

The big man was almost lifted from his feet. He fell sideways and even as he fell Phil struck again, this time under the ear. Leo Crex fell like a sack of meal and with one little shiver lay like a dead man.

A quick glance across the street told Phil that no one had seen it. A chorus of shouts punctuated with raucous laughter

from the Malpais told him that all men there were busy. He seized the big man under the arms, heaved him inside the store and dragged him the full length of the room.

A quick snatch at a coil of lariat rope on a shelf brought it on his head. He seized his victim, threw him over on his back, took the bight of the rope and set to work quicker than he had ever worked over a roped steer, and in two minutes Leo Crex, owner of Trecientos Rancho, dictator of Amargo Valley, was wrapped in a cocoon of loose rope and was dragged behind a barrier of canvas-jacketed hams and bags of beans. He was wrapped as carefully as any piece of meat for a barbecue and as a final touch, Phil stuffed his mouth with a handful of greasy blue paper stripped from a discarded rusty ham.

"Now, darn you," he said breathlessly as he rose to his feet above his helpless victim, "I reckon you'll stay put this time for a spell."

As he reached the door, Plack arrived exuding apologies at every pore that was not already sweating beer.

"I'm sure obliged to you for lookin' after my customers," he said. "Anybody come in?"

"Yeah. One man came in. He didn't buy anything, though," said Phil. "Well, I'll be on my way."

He found Zeno already packed and wondering what had become of his "boss." Phil knew he had no time to waste. Crex might get loose at any moment and that would mean a running fight and a possible discovery of their hiding place. He swung into saddle and snatched the blinds from the pack-mule.

"*'Sta bueno,*" he said shortly. "Let's get started, Zeno."

They hit the trail at a round trot, the swinging packs jangling, and they never checked till they had gone five miles.

"Zeno," said Phil, "do you know this man Crex?"

"*Si señor.* As well as I wish to know him, or the devil. He is bad."

"Who? The devil?" Phil grinned. And Zeno grinned back at him.

"He came into Plack's store while I was there and he recognized me. I swiped him with two hundred rounds of ammunition and laid him out."

"Then, señor, he and his men will be on our trail at once." And Zeno began to rowel his pony unmercifully till Phil stopped him.

THEY took a jog trot and killed some miles on the level, dipped into an arroyo and came by devious turns and twists into the last crooked little canyon that led to the caves.

Later, when supper had been eaten and while the lined faces of the Mexicans thrust through the smoke as they listened to his recital, Phil told exactly what had occurred. As a final gesture he passed the newly acquired rifle across the fire to Hard Rock. The old man took it, wiped the breech carefully and methodically with his shirt sleeve and hefted it lightly.

"I'm sure glad to have this back in my hands," he said gently. "Some day I aim to square things with Leo Crex and when it happens he'll not know what hit him. I'll wipe him out as a man wipes out dirt."

And there was such venom in his voice that Phil felt a little shiver run up his backbone.

"Listen here, Hard Rock"—Phil leaned forward across the fire—"you and I know that Leo Crex is the man who killed your partner over in the Devil's Pocket that you described to me. It's pretty clear he's laid a plot to get you somehow. You spoke of a glory hole that you think Crex dug in the hill above where you and Rames were taking out ore. Now a man like this man Crex doesn't spend his time diggin' glory holes for fun. What do you figure out from that?"

"Well it's thisaway—" Hard Rock came back to the fire and dug a heel into the back-log. "From what I seen of that ore, and from what I know old Scotty thought of what we got, I believe it's the richest kind.

"Crex dug his own hole up there and he knows how rich the place is. I believe that's why he shot old Scotty. I only wonder he didn't git me, too. You see, me an' Scotty was plannin' to stake out our claims in that Devil's Pocket just as soon as I got back from gettin' Gray's report on the assay. As a matter o' fact, we knowed just about what that ore would show. I been in Alaska and I tell you right now, it's got Copper River and Tanana skinned a mile from the ace."

"Do you mean to tell me that that land about the glory hole that you mention

has not been staked out in claims. That no one has ever taken up any claims there?"

"There ain't ary sign of a stake or of a claim up there," said Hard Rock positively. "Why?"

"Because if no claims have been staked out there and if old Crex has been wildcatting ore from that glory hole that he has dug, there must be something damned shady about it. Why hasn't he staked out his claims? Why hasn't he bought up the land? There must be some damned good reason to hold him off.

"It looks to me as though he's just holdin' the place and shootin' up anybody who comes in there so no one but himself shall know what the place hides. We'd better get over there as soon as we can and stake out some claims for ourselves. Suppose you and I and Pedro go over to that Bulso de Diablo in the morning?"

"Suits me," said Hard Rock laconically as he sought his blanket.

CHAPTER VII

Crex Gets a Scare

JERRY PLACK spent quite as much time in the Malpais Saloon as in his own store. Small excuse was all that was needed to draw him across the street where a poker game was always in the making and drinks were at a discount. After Phil left him, Plack went to dinner; after dinner he took a siesta and went again to the Malpais where he had to render a judicial opinion about the proper mixing of a Cowpuncher's Delight, so it was five o'clock when he returned to his store.

As he entered the place a deep soulful groan that was half grunt made him stop in his tracks and stare about him helplessly. The row of rusty steel traps on the low rafters gave no clue. Neither did the piles of patent fence-posts. That groan came from the back of the store. He snatched a rifle from the show-window, pumped a cartridge into the chamber, and holding it in hands that trembled visibly, walked slowly to the rear of the store.

"Come out o' there, you damn skulker," shouted Mister Plack.

A rat as big as a cat leaped from among the hams, tripped over Mr. Plack's feet and leaped for safety. Plack nearly dropped the gun as he wiped the dripping sweat from his face. He paused as another groan came to him. Then he put his head over a pile of sacked hams and nearly fell over backward at what he saw.

Leo Crex, owner of the great Trecientos rancho, dictator of all Amargo Valley, lay there tied up like a roll of old carpets! His mouth was stuffed with greasy blue papers, his eyes were starting from their sockets and a little white foam lay in the corner of his mouth. Plack made the fatal mistake of loosing first the paper gag. When the first flow of profanity was over, Crex rolled aside and tried to sit up but he had been too carefully tied.

"Cut me loose, you damned old fool," he snarled. "Cut these ropes."

Plack shook his head and bent over the knots of the rope, fumbling at them with fingers something less elastic than so many frost-bitten carrots.

"I ain't cuttin' no lariat rope," he said. "You kin cut it if you want to after you've done bought it. Whoever done this has tied you with the bight o' the coil. If I cut it, it'll plumb ruin two hundred foot o' prime lariat rope. Leave it to me. I'll untie it if it takes me a week."

That determination failed to appeal to Leo Crex. He was a passionate old man used to having his own way and at once.

"You cut this damned rope and cut it right away or I'll cut your throat when I'm loose," he shouted.

Mister Plack promptly backed off and seated himself on three hams. Two were his personal property. The other he had not yet paid for.

"That ain't no way to coax me to help you," he said. "You belong over in your own valley. You got no business here. Your place is plumb across the hills. Over there you're Leo Crex runnin' Trecientos. Over here you're just a plain bad *hombre* what most men is afeard of 'cause they owe you money. If you want me to cut that rope you got to buy it first."

"You—you—" Words failed Leo Crex. He was rarely eloquent, but now, save for appeals to a deity he had frequently denied, he spoke bitterly. "Cut that rope," he said. "I'll buy it."

"That ain't no way to talk," said Mister Plack. "I've had my mouth washed out with lye fer less when I was your age. Beside that I've knowed a whole lot o' men who said they'd buy a thing, but

when the time come to pay fer it they was off visitin'. Lyman done that about some rabbit fencin' I done sold him an' I got stuck.

"That's why I ain't figgerin' on your buyin' that whole coil o' rope. You think right now you want it. But after I cut it an' loose you, you'll find out mebbe you didn't need that rope so bad after all. Anyhow—"

"Oh, you damned fool! Didn't I say I'll pay you?"

"Yeah. I heard you. An' you don't even know how much it is. Let me tell you, that's a right good piece o' rope. Double twist an' not a inch that hasn't been twice laid an' tested. It's wuth all o' thutty cents a foot, an' whoever done you up used all o' two hundred foot.

"That'll be—Le's see—" He got a pencil stub from his pocket and looked about for a piece of paper, but could only find the piece that he had taken from Crex's mouth. He flattened it on his trembling knee and after sucking audibly at his pencil till he nearly sucked out the lead, he indulged in some lengthy calculations.

"Two hundred foot at thutty cents a foot—That comes to pret' nigh ten dollars. Call it ten dollars fer the rope—"

"It's in my pocket," said Crex. "Take it out, pay yourself and cut that rope."

PLACK got the money from the pocket and reluctantly cut strand after strand. When the last coil fell away and Crex rose stiffly, Mister Plack backed off and raised his rifle ostentatiously.

"Whoever done that was sure used to tyin' hogs," he said placatingly. "Who done it?"

"I came in here to see you. The first thing I knew a couple of men jumped me from behind the door. One of 'em was carryin' a bundle of iron drills. At least it looked like that. He hit me across the face. You kin see the marks on my chin here." He thrust forward a granite-like chin that bore the marks of the ammunition with which Phil had hit him. "That put me out, I reckon. They must have dragged me back an' tied me up before I came to. Then they got away—"

"An' you ain't got no idee who done it?" demanded Mister Plack.

"No, you fool. I tell you they were strangers. I never seen 'em before."

"Huh. That's right funny, too. Seems to be a mess o' strangers in town these days. The only stranger I seen was early this mornin'. He come in to buy some forty-five ammunition an' he wound up by buyin' a lot o' ca'tridges and old Hard Rock Simms's forty-five rifle—What the hell ails you now?" he demanded curtly for at his words Leo Crex's chin sagged and his mouth dropped open.

"He—bought—what?" he asked weakly. Surely, he thought, he had not heard aright.

"I said he bought Hard Rock Simms's rifle," said Mister Plack. "An' that's what I mean. Some days ago, old Scotty Rames an' Hard Rock was fixin' to go back into the hills, but they had no money to buy supplies. I give 'em twenty dollars and I took both their guns in hock. Come this stranger an' said he might be int'rested in a gun if the price was right, so I sold it to him."

"You sold him Hard Rock Simms's rifle—" said Leo Crex again.

"That's what I said." Mr. Plack nodded confirmatively. "Nothin' the matter o' your hearin'?" And Mr. Plack "reached back," took a plug of "eatin' tobacco" from a hip pocket, cut off a generous slice and deposited it where it would do him most good.

"You see, knowin' Hard Rock broke jail, I knowed he'd sca'cely come back fer that rifle. Him and Scotty Rames sure needed that twenty dollars fere a grubstake."

For a long moment old Crex stared unseeingly at the little storekeeper. Then he gathered his wits and started for the door and old Jerry unsmilingly watched him go.

"I reckon I socked you where you live that time," he muttered. "Now what?"

THE moment Leo Crex reached the white-hot street the need for immediate action drove him like the furies. He felt that he must do something and do it quickly.

Why had he ever been fool enough to have said clearly and distinctly that he had seen Hard Rock Simms *shoot* his partner? A simple statement that he had seen Hard Rock *kill* him would have been sufficient.

The natural deduction struck him like a physical blow.

According to his own story two men had been present when Rames was killed—himself and Hard Rock! If his story

was true, either Hard Rock or he himself had shot Rames and now Plack could swear that Hard Rock had no gun on this trip into the Espinazos.

Of course no man would dare make any mention of his possible implication until the dead body of Scotty Rames was found. Fool that he was to have left that body where it fell! There was damning evidence in that body that if discovered, would hang him. His rifle, with which he had killed Rames, carried a thirty-thirty bullet. The bullet in Rames's dead body was a thirty-thirty.

Hard Rock's rifle was a forty-five, as Plack could swear if necessary. He must recover the bullet that had killed Rames before someone else should get it.

He headed straight for the hotel where Walter was awaiting him. The moment Walter saw his father's face he realized that silence was golden. He waited for the first word to come.

"I got to git back right away to Trecientos," said Leo Crex grimly. "You stay here and do exactly what I told you. Stay here till that girl Ellen Mathis gits here on the eighteenth. Meet her and just tell her you came to bring her to the Lyin' Y. Then take her over the Espinazos to the old ranch house. I'll be there.

"Mind what I tell you. Let her believe she's goin' to the Lyin' Y. While you're doin' that, Sam Marks will clean up on the Lyin' Y. He'll rebrand 'em Bar Chevron and drive 'em across the pass where we'll pick 'em up. He says he kin round up nigh five thousand head. Be sure you do exactly like I tell you. First of all I'll see Lynn Davis about that survey to throw the Devil's Pocket inside the line of Trecientos. I kin handle Davis."

"Need any help?" asked Walter.

"Help? Who? Me? Not likely. Davis knows where he stands with me. You do what I say. I'll be movin' now."

LEAVING word for his horse to be saddled and kept for him, Crex strode down the long street to the little bungalow where Lynn Davis, the County Engineer and Surveyor, "bached" it alone. Crex knew Davis well and knew his failing. Once before, in a case that involved important issues for the State, Crex had saved Davis's official hide. Also from time to time he had loaned him money as he had to most men who he thought might some day be useful to him.

Lynn Davis was a type all too common in the West. Graduate of an Eastern college, he had taken his new diploma and his newer ambition to this Western land where he hoped to make a fortune. He might easily have done this but for one fact—whiskey was too plentiful.

Davis was a big man, red-faced under a gray stubble, with the kindly look about the mouth that tells of one who cares too much perhaps for the opinions of others. He rose ponderously from a big chair as Leo Crex threw open the gate and came rapidly up the walk.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Crex," he said, holding out a big, damp hand. "Like a decent drink? I just got some pretty good stuff."

"Let's see how good it is." Crex settled himself in a chair while Davis picked some mint from the edges of the irrigating ditch and rapidly concocted an improvised mint julep, talking as he mixed.

"A man came in here last month," he said, "to see me about makin' the estimates on a big water tank he wants dug. He was here for five days an' drank up most all of a case of whiskey I had. Seems he'd never had a mint julep an' he took to 'em like a duck to a June bug. His name was Fortin, from over on Red Water.

"Last week I went over there and I asked about him. His old negro servant told me he was dead. Doc Lisle said he died of double pneumonia, but that old nigger swore he died of poison 'cause some white man got him to mix his whiskey with greens. Can you beat that? How about it?"

Crex sipped, smelled it, and sipped again. "It don't seem to be killin' me," he said. "Looka here, Davis," he said curtly. "I got a job for you. It's worth a thousand dollars in cold cash if you do it right. If you don't feel like undertakin' it, maybe it'll be better fer me to have you move. See? Resign your job and pull your freight. What say?"

Lynn Davis' eyes flickered a little. He knew this domineering old man was as hard as steel and as unbending. He knew that he always exacted two dollars' worth for every dollar spent. What could Crex want now?

A spasm of unease gripped him as he realized that no matter what Leo Crex

wanted him to do, he was in no position to refuse. With a sick wife in a distant expensive sanatarium where she needed constant attention and a private nurse, he had heavy demands on a pay that never was enough for his needs. He could never realize that the tills of the Malpais Saloon took more than their fair share of his income.

"Let me hear more about it," he said. "I'm the one to make up my own mind, you know. I reckon I'll not move till I have to. Loosen up."

"I will." But the big jaw muscles on Leo Crex's face seemed to bunch and his jaw whitened. That was a bad sign and Davis knew it. "You know the Espinazo country?"

"I've been a little ways into it. Not far, but I know pretty well what it is."

"Nobody kin know it who ain't been there," said Crex. "It's a mighty rough land, but a first-rate land to winter cattle. But that's all. It ain't been surveyed in fifty years. The Lyin' Y Ranch runs up on one side of the pass. My lands of Trecientos run up on the other. Between the two is the big tract that winds up in the Bulso de Diablo.

"Like I say, it's good winterin' country an' that's all. It's filled with little deep canyons with water in 'em an' plenty of mesquite beans and sacaton an' red willow that'll keep cattle all winter.

"I want the lines of my Trecientos Ranch resurveyed, Davis, and I want that survey to show that the Devil's Pocket by right should have been a part of Trecientos when I bought it. It ought to be easy to work it."

"Easy, hell," said Davis shortly. He stepped to the edge of the porch and knocked out the dottel of his pipe and stood staring at Crex.

THIS man surely could not know what he demanded. In a checkered life spent along the fringes of the white man's world there were some things that Lynn Davis had never done. He had never lied. He had never double-crossed a friend. He had never prostituted his profession by flagrant disregard of his professional ethics.

This last was exactly what this old devil was demanding of him. If he did this thing, if he should make a false survey and certify to it, he knew he could never again hold up his head and look his kind in the face.

"I swear, Mister Crex, I don't see how I can do that," he said.

"All right. I know it sounds queer at first off but—it's all right. No hard feelin's, Davis. By the way—how's your wife gettin' along?"

"Doc Lisle says she can't outlive the year." A spasm twitched Davis' cheek and his eyes stared straight before him into the sun as his slowly moving brain conjured up a vision of past years; a vision of a bright-faced girl who had so gladly allied her lot to his. That memory rose and smote him. If he only had some money!

"Them sanatariums cost a lot o' money," said Crex s e n t e n t i o u s l y. "Wouldn't Colorado Springs help her none?"

"Lisle says six months at Steamboat Springs 'ud give her a new lease on life. But what the hell's the use talkin'? I've borrowed every dollar in sight. He might as well tell me to send her to Patagonia. I just haven't got the money. I've just got to wait and see her die."

"How much do you need? In actual cash, I mean?"

"Less'n a thousand dollars. Great heavens, man! I've gambled that much on a pair o' Jacks in my time—"

"D'you mean that you kin save your wife's life fer a thousand dollars an' you won't do it?" said Leo Crex. "D'you mean to tell me that you won't swing an airline of a survey a half-mile to one side to save her? By gar, Davis, you're a fool. If you don't jump at this job o' mine you'll be a wife murderer. More'n that, if you don't do it, someone else will. I kin git engineers and surveyors by the carload.

"I want you to do it because when you sign the papers there'll not even be a discussion. They know you. That's why. It ain't much of a job. The land up there except fer winterin' cattle ain't worth a curse."

"Then why don't you buy it?" demanded Davis astutely.

"Because a man named Sturton took it up on scrip after the old Maricopa Minin' Company gave it up as worthless and I can't find Sturton. If I advertise for him and he finds out I want to buy the land he'll jump the price so high I can't afford it. See?"

It was a reasonable explanation. Davis nodded thoughtfully. For a moment an indignant refusal trembled on his lips but that refusal was killed before it was born.

"You git that job done up right," said Crex quietly, "and I'll cancel the two thousand dollar mortgage I hold on this place."

Davis nodded and picked up a big scale map of the district, that he pored over. What Crex had said about the land was in the main correct. It was worthless except as a wintering place for stock. He studied the legend on the map.

"This map's pretty old," he murmured.

"I bet it is," said Crex. "It's like I told you. The place hasn't been surveyed in fifty years. How'll you do it?"

"I'll need one man to help me," said Davis. "No use lettin' more'n you have to tell know about it. You see, these old maps were made by a magnetic compass. The line of true north changes each year by a small amount of annual variation.

"It's been fifty years since this map was made. That means that fifty times the annual variation will have to be taken off or added onto the bearing I find by my compass. I'll have to find some established point from which to start and—"

"Hell, man, you're as bad as a doctor bein' asked what a disease is like. Do it your own way. It may help you to get old Sam Marks to give you a hand. He knows the country. Them Lyin' Y men are up there a lot durin' the year. Sam knows the place, I bet. You do what I want and I'll play fair. Mind now—I want your survey to show that the Bulso de Diablo lies by right inside the Trecientos line. Is it a go?"

"It's a go," said Davis heavily. "Just one thing more, Crex—about that money. I can use it right now. I've just got to have it if I'm to keep my wife alive."

Crex glanced sharply at him; then he pulled a wallet from his pocket, peeled off a handful of bills and tossed them to the table. A moment later he drank off the remains of his julep and stamped off down the walk.

HIS horse was at the tie-rack before the hotel and in five minutes he was on the trail leading to the distant pass. His brain was in a whirl as he rode and he tried to piece out all that he had learned.

He remembered Plack's words about Hard Rock Simms. Plack himself had had in his possession the very rifle that he, Crex, had sworn he had seen Hard Rock use to kill his partner. Then—if that dead body was brought to Pintano for investigation, it would be found that Rames had been killed, not by the forty-five-calibre bullet but by a thirty-thirty!

The bullet might even now be in the body. He knew well enough that an expert could even identify the rifle from which that bullet had been fired. An examination would certainly clear Hard Rock Simms of the charge of murder. It would set him free and Hard Rock Simms knew all about the wealth of the Devil's Pocket.

Above all things he must get that dead body and remove the damning bullet if it was there. After that, Hard Rock Simms and his new partner, Kitts, must be removed. He knew exactly how to do that. He had men at Trecientos who could attend to that matter for him. That was why they were at Trecientos. Most important of all just now was—that dead body of Scotty Rames.

He sank his spurs into the rowel-seats and sent his horse up the rocky trail at a gallop till he reached the crest from which he had seen that ball of yellow smoke. Across the distant ridge lay the Devil's Pocket. He must get over there at once.

This time he wasted no time afoot. He sent his horse at those rocky slopes in a headlong rush and the pony was in a lather when Crex drew rein at the spot from which he had fired the fatal shot. He could even identify the madrono bush that had struck him in the eye and saved the life of Hard Rock Simms.

He parted the heavy brush and looked down into the pocket. The red scar of the glory hole from which he had looted a fortune in the past few years stood out against the hillside like a giant scar. The charred embers of the old campfire lay like a blot on the yellow grass and the odds and ends of the camp that Hard Rock had so quickly left were spread out before him. But of the dead body of Scotty Rames there was no sign!

His breath came heavily and he sweated in big slow drops as he forced his reluctant pony to the place where old Scotty

had fallen. A little dried blood had congealed on a flat rock and the red edges curled up in the heat. Murder had been done in that spot and even mute Nature shouted aloud her protest. But of the body there was no sign.

What had happened there? His heart seemed to stop beating. Sheer terror gripped him, the cold uncalculating terror that sees a clue in every leaf. What had he overlooked? No one could have seen him. He knew Scotty Rames had been killed instantly. No man, no matter how badly wounded, ever dropped as Scotty had dropped. And he knew his own deadly skill with the rifle. No, Scotty was dead! There was no question about that but—where was the body?

He hunted vaguely through that scrub. He worked carefully over every inch of the little Pocket but he found no clue. There was nothing to show that any one had been there. Yet he knew that someone must have been there. A dozen questions recurred to him and at times he wondered if his mind was failing.

"One thing," he muttered as he thrust his sweating horse up the slope on the trail to Trecientos, "they can't accuse me of havin' shot him unless the body is found. If the wolves had got him I'd have seen some sign. I'll set Pym to work from Trecientos—first of all to find the body and after that to get Hard Rock Simms and that damned man Kitts who's with him now. But I don't like this a little bit."

He slapped home his bloody spurs and took the hillslopes at a gallop with fear and superstition riding on his saddle cantle. For the first time in his evil life Leo Crex knew fear, stark, cold, compelling fear. And what made the matter worse was the fact that he did not know definitely just what he had to fear.

CHAPTER VIII

On the Danger Trail

TRECIENTOS baked in the heat as Leo Crex rode up to the ranchhouse. A Mexican laborer scuttling across the yard came cringingly to take his horse as the door of the bunkhouse opened and a man come out into the glare.

"Come over here, Pym," shouted Crex.

Pym came, a great hulking figure whose head seemed too large for his huge body and every other member seemed too big for the others. As he came he grinned and his lips seemed to swell and protrude with that grin.

Aleck Pym, half foreman, half general factotum for Leo Crex, was a fit assistant for his master. He had lived at Trecientos for seven years for the very good reason that if he had left its limits, the law would promptly have laid its hands on him. Only at Trecientos was he safe.

"Where are the men?" demanded Crex sharply.

"Up on the mesa guardin' the peons cuttin' grass fer fodder," said Pym in a surly tone.

"Get four of 'em," said Crex. "I've got a man-sized job for you. Choose four men and come to the office. I'll see you alone."

Pym nodded, roped a pony in the corral, flung a saddle on him and spurred out of the yard heading for the mesa a mile away where the white men guarded the peons at work to prevent the escape of any of them. He scanned the guard, selected four, curtly ordered them back to the ranchhouse and sought Crex in his office.

Pym dropped his hat at the door, mute testimony to Crex, and slouched into the room where Crex, knowing the psychological effect, studied him from his seat. His light eyes seemed to wander all over Pym who shuffled his feet under the concentrated stare. He had to say something.

"I come like you told me," he said awkwardly.

"Yeah." Crex nodded. "When I tell you to come and you don't come the U. S. Marshal in Rio Pinto will be told where you are. He'd give a lot to lay hands on the men who held up the Wells-Fargo express car and killed the messenger. I reckon there'd be a hangin' bee."

Pym was sure of that. More than a thousand times he regretted that futile grab for wealth that had put him and his men in the iron clutch of Leo Crex. To be sure Crex himself had committed a score of crimes but Crex had always used these men as cat's-paws and every offense only entangled them more hopelessly in his web. Leo Crex was a giant spider.

"What is it this time?" demanded Pym.

"Just a little job." Crex knew he must stick to the tale already told. "When I was ridin' down to the Lyin' Y, I found

Hard Rock Simms and Scotty Rames stealin' ore from the Devil's Pocket . . . ."

Pym let go an inarticulate oath and his Adam's apple rose and fell quickly. He had worked with Crex in the Devil's Pocket and he knew what it contained. He suspected what might come.

"I'd left my gun on my saddle," said Crex. "Hard Rock shot his partner and got away with a sack of ore and took it in to Pintano. I rode in there and told Girton about Hard Rock killin' Rames.

"Girton arrested Simms but he got away. He's loose in the hills right now with a stranger named Kitts and three greasers he let out o' jail. Most likely Simms has headed back for the Bulso de Diablo. He'll want to hide that dead body.

"You see, the law will have to produce the body to prove that a murder's actually been committed and Hard Rock will want to hide it. You take your men and go over there; strike the trail and bring back the body of Scotty Rames. Keep on the trail till you find it. I don't keer how long it takes you. After that, find and settle with Simms and the man Kitts. Understand me?"

"What'll we do with Simms and the man Kitts?" demanded Pym.

At that Crex exploded. "You damned fool," he stormed. "Do I need to make you a map and write out yore orders? You know well enough what to do with 'em. How many men will you take?"

"Four," said Pym. "That'll be plenty. I'm takin' Linton, Sykes, Jones an' Besser."

Crex grinned his satisfaction. Four greater scoundrels could not be found south of the Palouse. He stepped to the window and watched the men saddling up in the corral and turned to Pym.

"You sabe this job," he said. "I want it done right. Don't come to me and say you couldn't find what I tell you to find. You do as I tell you or go to jail. When you come back you'll bring with you the dead body of Scotty Rames and you'll show me where Kitts and Simms are lyin'."

Pym understood clearly. He retrieved his hat and joined his men and five minutes later they moved like drifting shadows down the trail, headed across the ranges toward the distant tract of the Bulso de Diablo.

For several miles no words were spoken. Each man of that group knew they were on a quest for Crex that meant much to Crex and added trouble for themselves. Finally Jones croaked out:

"What the hell does the old coyote want this time, Aleck?"

Pym grunted. "What's he ever want but someone to pull fire fer him. If anybody gits their fingers burnt it won't be that old devil. He knows what's in the Devil's Pocket and he ain't goin' to have Simms runnin' about and talkin' about it. He wants the place fer his'n."

"Why the hell don't he file on it? Why don't he do like he always has done; make one of us stake it out as a homestead and then sell it to him fer a dollar?"

"What's botherin' me is this," said Pym. "While Crex was away, that redheaded cowpuncher, Dyer, from the Lyin' Y come up to Trecientos with a letter from Sam Marks to old Crex. Dyer said he seen old man Crex's horse standin' in the trail just where Crex left him when he trailed on foot over to the Devil's Pocket. Dyer said — What's that?" he asked suddenly. He jerked a hand toward the distant skyline to the northeast. "It looks like red dust a-risin'!"

It was; just the faintest film of red dust that would have been invisible to any but desert-trained eyes.

"It's miles away," grunted Sykes.

"Yeah, but it's over in the general direction of the Devil's Pocket. We'll take to the brush here."

Cursing over his caution they dropped into trace behind him and Pym took up his march across the low hogback. The entire country was a maze of valleys heading nowhere, ending aimlessly. It was just a formless jumble of hills and valleys thrown away by the Master Hand that had spilled them as a builder throws away surplus material.

"Whoever it is, is sure ridin' fer a fall," quoth Sykes, pulling his pony by main strength back to the trail from which he had slipped. "They can't have any notion anybody's here."

His tired pony nosed up-wind, raised his head suddenly, closed his eyes as in prayer and before his nostrils could be seized to repress it sent a shrill whinny echoing over hill and valley.

"Gol darn it," quoth Sykes. "A man kin hear that a mile away."

Three men less than a half-mile away

heard it distinctly. That shrill challenge had not died away before Phil seized his pony by the nose muffling the reply and Pedro and Hard Rock followed suit. The next moment the three men stood staring at each other.

"THAT'LL be from some of Crex's men," said Hard Rock with an oath. "It can't be anyone else. I reckon we'd better take a look-see."

"If it is Crex we've got to be mighty careful," cautioned Phil. "We know what he did the last time he was here. Pedro" —he turned to the little Mexican—"you stay here with the ponies while we do some scouting. Don't move till we return."

Pedro grunted acquiescence and backed the horses into the scrub.

"Whoever it is is sure to have seen our dust, señor," he cautioned. "Look there—" He pointed to a high, thin dust-cloud rising on the trail by which they had come. "Do not show yourselves in the open, señor. In this land even the prairie dogs bark only on their own mounds."

Phil grinned, slipped his rifle from its boot and joined Hard Rock and they took the trail that led to the low divide to the south.

That shrill whinny had told them that they had been observed, for a horse whinnies only at sight or, in case of water, at smell, and Phil was sure that only men from Crex or from the Lying Y would be here. Still, it might be Girton with his posse. He voiced his thought but Hard Rock shook his head.

"Remember I'm supposed to have killed old Scotty," he said. "Girton is trailin' me if anyone. He'll never think to look for the killer in the place he done his killin'. That's the last place he'd be. It's Crex or his men as sure as hell."

"Do you know Crex's men by sight?" asked Phil.

"I know some of 'em. He's got a bad bunch at Trecientos. Only his white men are allowed to leave the place and they don't often get into Pintano. Mostly that gang holes in by itself at Potter's Folly, thirty miles west from here. Look! Yonder, they are—"

He pointed to a line of figures riding in single file through the brush a half mile away where Pym and his men defiled slowly down a draw with no idea that they were in sight.

"That's Aleck Pym in the lead," said Hard Rock. "He's Crex's right bower. He's even worse'n old Crex. I bet he's been sent out here to look for us."

"It's easy to find out." Phil felt his gorge rise at sight of those men. To be pursued by Girton and his posse was one thing. That was done under guise of the law for Girton had some right on his side. Girton was at least acting on testimony sworn to by Leo Crex and he himself had broken jail and released three prisoners.

But to be hunted like a coyote by Crex's men was a little too much. These men were acting on their own initiative and must take the consequences. But first he must discover their real intentions. He muttered a few words to Hard Rock who laughed grimly.

"I don't like it a bit," he said. "It's too damned risky. But it'll sure make 'em show their hands. If you've got the nerve, go to it."

Hard Rock sank out of sight in the madrono thicket and Phil, cramming his hat down on his head, quietly stepped out into full view on the low crest. For a moment he stood, deliberately erect, then he walked slowly along the ridge apparently keeping his eyes on the ground as though studying it but carefully observing Pym and his men. Still stooping he saw Pym throw up his hand. Instantly the four men behind him were out of saddle on the "off" side.

The next moment Phil was suddenly aware of a point of light as the sun caught a bared rifle-barrel; then a jet of white smoke shot from under the belly of a plunging horse and a bullet spatted on a rock at his feet. A curt shout came to him as Pym dived for cover.

"Damn you, Sykes," someone shouted. "On'y a fool could miss at that range."

Pym threw a cartridge into his rifle-chamber, sighted quickly and fired. Again a bullet spatted, a little closer.

"That's what comes of shootin' downhill," muttered Phil. "Undershoot every time. I wonder if I've got the nerve to carry it out—"

He summoned all his nerve and it came at his call. He bent lower and broke into a run and a volley broke from the five men. Two of those bullets smacked into the loose shale at his feet; the others went high with the cracking "secondary

report" of passing shots of high-power rifles.

Two more shots spat from under a plunging horse and the next moment Phil staggered along the hill slope and plunged headlong to the ground; his head dropped supinely over his rifle stock and his body lay limp. A loud screech broke from the men who saw him drop and was topped by a bull-roar from Pym.

"That was my shot got him, Sykes," he shouted. "I told Crex I'd get 'em an' I done it. That's my on'y one. That man Hard Rock Simms must be near. They're together. That's the man Kitts."

Sykes shouted a reply and Phil could hear indistinctly their talk as they rode up the slope toward him.

Hard Rock Simms, seeing Phil fall, gave no sign. Squatting in the madrono scrub he grinned into his beard and rubbed his shirt-sleeve over his rifle-bolt. He did not like this plan. It savored too much of chance and Hard Rock did not believe in luck.

THE men scrambled up the hill shouting and yelling approval at their success. Crex had sent them to get this stranger Kitts and Hard Rock and already they had done half their job. It remained only to find a dead body that surely could not run away and to "get" Hard Rock Simms.

They hurried breathlessly toward the long figure on the crest that gave no sign of life. There was something pathetic in the droop of the head across the rifle stock. Pym, arriving first, paused near Phil to regain his breath.

"So this here is the man Kitts?" he said. "I'm glad we got him first. He's the brains of the pair. We'll have no trouble roundin' up old Simms now. Old Crex was sure in earnest about gettin' this bird."

"What'd they do, Crex?" demanded Jones.

"A whole lot. They know stuff that old Crex don't want to have told to no one. Scatter out, you fellers, and look fer Hard Rock Simms. We got to git him, too."

"Where'd you hit him, Pym?" demanded Linton.

Pym never got a chance to answer. While the reply still stuck in his throat, the figure at his feet sprang erect and Phil, pistol in hand, his eyes blazing, thrust that pistol muzzle stiffly into Pym's belly. Pym, appalled, gave back as Phil snapped out tensely:

"Hands up, you fools. I've got you covered from the scrub."

Jones made the first mistake. He grabbed for his gun. A rifle cracked in the scrub and Jones went down immediately. It happened so quickly that they were paralyzed. Then Pym, with a bull-roar, dropped—hand to gun.

The pistol flashed in its open holster at his hip and the heavy bullet snatched at Phil's shirt collar. Then Phil's gun roared and Pym went down on his back, both hands clutching at his belly as Phil sidestepped and with his smoking gun swept the circle of men whose hands were high in air. Then Hard Rock catfooted out of the madrono thicket, his smoking rifle in his hand.

"Green as alfalfa," he said laconically. "I never thought they'd fall to a lure like that. Playin' possum sure did git 'em. What now?"

"Take their hardware while I hold 'em covered. Take the *whang* off their holsters and tie their hands behind 'em. If they move, I shoot."

Linton, Sykes and Besser stood appalled. Pym and Jones had been killed so suddenly that the living men were paralyzed. They had come to hunt two "coyotes," as they thought, and they had come across two bloody timber wolves and those wolves had made their kill.

"By heck," Besser almost sobbed as Hard Rock jerked his hands together and lashed them with a strip of whang, "old man Crex'll have yore blood fer that."

"Uh huh. An' who'll help him?" inquired Hard Rock caustically.

"Let 'em sit down," said Phil quietly.

"I ain't sittin'," snarled Sykes.

"Lie down, then." And Hard Rock deftly kicked the man's legs from under him. The others silently squatted by Sykes and waited. Besser's face was covered with great beads of sweat that Phil observed with satisfaction. This man at least had nerves.

"I'm asking you some questions," said Phil; "an' you're answerin'."

"Not me," said Besser truculently. "I'm tongue-tied."

"I've got a cure for that." Phil jerked Besser's boots off. "Question number one—who sent you here?"

"I ain't tellin' you nothin," said Bes-

ser, struggling with the whang that held his hands. But the sweat had soaked that whang and it held like steel cable.

Phil pulled a matchbox from his pocket and squatted at Besser's feet but Hard Rock snatched at his hand with a muttered oath.

"My God, man," he said, "you can't do this. We ain't Apaches."

Phil shook him loose. "Listen to me, Hard Rock," he said in a low voice. "These men were sent to kill you and me. To protect ourselves we've got to prove who sent 'em. We only *suspect* so far. I'm goin' to *know*." Then he turned to Besser, who was shivering a little. "You've got exactly a half-minute to make up your mind," he said. "If you refuse to talk, I'll stick some lighted matches between your toes. After that there are some mighty delicate tissues under the arms. If I were you, I'd talk. Who sent you here?"

BESSER cast an agonized look at his companions but they had their own troubles. They realized that if Besser would not talk, their turns would come. They knew this tall stranger meant what he said.

"You better talk, Skinny," snarled Sykes. "Crex can't pay you fer scorched feet."

"Yeah." Besser was half-sobbing now. "I talk an' then you tell Crex I talked an' how long will I live? All right," he shrieked as a lighted match thrust at his bare foot. "I'll talk! Crex told Pym—that's the man you killed—to come over here. We was to find an' bring back the dead body of old Scotty Rames and we to dry-gulch you two."

"Why did Crex want Rames' body?"

"I ain't sure," said Besser. "All I know is that Pym said Crex seen Hard Rock Simms kill Rames and he wants the body, to hang Simms."

"That's sure damn thoughtful an' kind of him," quoth Hard Rock. "What's he want my scalp fer?"

Besser gulped. Phil struck another match and cupped it as he leaned forward. Then Besser spoke with a little rush.

"Damn you," he sobbed. "Do you mean to torture me? If you've got to know, Crex wanted you-all put out o' business because Simms and Rames found out about the ore in the Devil's Pocket. The ore that old Crex has been workin' fer years. He don't want others in on the deal."

"Just what I thought," said Hard Rock, rising. "Is that big glory hole in the Pocket the place where Crex's been gettin' his ore?"

"Yeah." Besser weakened all at once and spoke sobbingly. "He used us white men from Trecientos to guard a lot of peons over there when he was workin' the place. That's why the peons ain't never allowed to leave Trecientos rancho. They'd tell."

"That fits in with what we know." Phil turned to Hard Rock. Then his mind reverted to another matter — what Ben Crocker had told him of the cattle deals between Crex and Marks. He could mentally vision the drawings Crocker had made of the different brands involved. It was a question worth asking.

"How many cattle of the Bar-Diamond-Bar and the Bar Chevron have you all worked over at Trecientos?" he asked.

Besser gulped visibly and Hard Rock cast a quick glance at Phil.

" 'Bout two thousand in two months," said Besser weakly. "We're lookin' fer a big drive soon. Four er five thousand. . . ."

"Huh. From the Lyin' Y, of course," said Phil.

Besser nodded speechlessly.

"By gar," shouted Sykes. "Now you've done it. Old Crex will have our hides fer this."

"When are these cattle to be delivered?" demanded Phil.

"The Lyin' Y outfit is roundin' up all they kin find right now," said Besser. "Walter Crex told us Marks of the Lyin' Y and old man Crex are cleanin' up the range before the new owner of the Lyin' Y gits here."

"What new owner?" asked Phil, who already knew the answer.

"I don't remember. All I know is that while old man Crex was over at Pintano, Dyer came from the Lyin' Y with a letter fer Crex from Sam Marks. It said the new owner's a girl, but I don't mind her name. She gits to Pintano on the eighteenth. Honest to God, that's all I know."

"All right. That's all I am after. What'll we do with 'em, Simms?"

"Kill 'em," said Hard Rock unemotionally. "They tried to kill us."

Phil shook his head.

"Get their horses," he said.

Hard Rock rounded up the ponies and joined Phil, who was grinning a little.

"First of all," he said, "take their belts and smash their guns."

It took the two men less than five minutes to very satisfactorily demolish those rifles and to scatter the cartridges over ten acres. That done, Hard Rock glanced at Phil for further orders.

"Take their pants and boots," said Phil grimly. "Strip 'em from the waist down."

In spite of struggles that made organized work difficult, the unfortunate men were stripped and Phil cut garments and boots into pieces. Presently he rose to his feet.

"I'm sendin' you back to Trecientos," he said. "And one of you take a message to Leo Crex. Just tell him this: Paul Kitts sends his regards. Tell him if I have to lock him up in jail again or to tie him up like a ham I'll sure leave him tied. But if I were you men I'd not let Crex know what you've told me this day. You can go now."

"How in hell kin we go back to Trecientos without pants?" groaned Sykes.

"You come into this world without 'em," growled Hard Rock. "Don't be so damned particular. Shall I herd 'em downhill?" he asked.

"Sure," said Phil. "We'll keep the horses."

CHAPTER IX

Lyin' Brands

"NOW we know where we stand with old man Crex," said Phil as they rejoined Pedro. "I suppose we ought to bury those two crooks."

"Leave 'em alone," growled Hard Rock. "Old man Crex wanted a dead body. We've give him two. I only wish it was more. I tell you one thing, Kynaston—when Sheriff Girton learns of this killin', we'll be listed as sure-enough killers."

"Shucks," said Phil. "If he's got common sense he'll know two men don't attack five. Come on, Hard Rock. We started to stake out our claims in the Devil's Pocket. Let's go."

They headed up the long valley keeping always to the bottom where the trail wound in and out among great boulders and between clumps of yellowing aspens and stands of stubby piñon pines. It was an ideal place to winter cattle and Phil said so, but Hard Rock merely grunted.

"If word ever gits out of the gold in the Espinazos this here land will never stay a cattle country," he said. "Me an' old Scotty always did want to take a flyer in here, but we never did till now. I wish to goodness we'd never heard tell o' the place," he said bitterly.

"Take the horses, Pedro," said Phil. "It'll not take us long."

He unstrapped a camp-axe and cut some white-wood stakes from a dead tree while Hard Rock laboriously wrote the descriptions of the claims.

"We'd better file on at least six," said Phil. "That'll give us real land in case it's worth it. We'll file on a claim for each of the men back at Twin Caves and one for each of us. That ought to take in the best part of the place."

"Yes, an' by gosh, I'm goin' to enclose old man Crex's glory hole in my claim," said Hard Rock. "It may not hold in law but it'll sure as hell make him prove his claim before a court. I'd not do a dirty trick like that with anyone else, but he's different."

"He'll foam at the mouth," grinned Phil. "As I see the matter, he can't or doesn't dare, for some reason, to file claims on the land here and he doesn't want anyone else to do it. Maybe someone else owns it."

"We'll sure find out by filin' our claims," said Hard Rock. "I'd ruther have anybody git it than that old devil."

HE drove the last stake and watched Phil making his careful entries in his notebook for future filing. When that last entry was made Phil rose and they got to horse and started down the trail by which Hard Rock had made his escape the day his partner had been shot.

The shadows of those deep canyons cast their depressing influence over the old prospector and he rode with his chin on his breast. Phil, guessing at his feelings, respected his taciturnity. Old Hard Rock had lost a partner here.

They rode all day till they came to the place where Phil and Pedro had helped Hard Rock bury his partner.

"Yonder's the place." Hard Rock pointed to the shallow trench that they had laboriously filled in.

"Look yonder," said Hard Rock quietly.

He reined his horse backward down the slope up which they had just ridden

and pointed to a dark spot below them whereon Phil saw a wagon moving slowly with two men riding behind it.

"A wagon from the Lyin' Y outfit," said Hard Rock. "They're on round-up. Not the spring round-up. This is special. I reckon their work's been done and lies behind 'em."

"What do you mean?" demanded Phil.

"The Lyin' Y has got a big log corral over there a bit," said Hard Rock. "I know it. I've seen it often. It's built across a stream so's to water the cows in the corral. They've fenced a corral that'll hold six er seven hundred cows. I'm just thinkin' we'd maybe better let that wagon git across the next divide an' then see what they've got in it."

They swung out of saddle and watched the wagon reeling drunkenly across the grassy swales. When it lurched out of sight over a ridge Hard Rock rose to his feet.

"You stay here a bit," he said. "I kin move lighter'n you. They may have left a herd guard at the corral."

It was a good half hour before he returned and motioned them into saddle.

"Come on," he said. "Nobody's there. There's a whole lot fer you to see."

With Pedro at his heels Phil followed him across the ridge and stopped his horse at the summit, but Hard Rock urged him on.

"Don't stop there," he said. "Never stop on a skyline. It may cost you your life out here. Yonder's the corral."

He pointed to a seven-foot fence made of six-inch posts lashed with rawhide to huge stringers that ran drunkenly across an enclosure. That corral was really a small fenced field through which a little stream ran and into which prairie hay had been tossed in great unsightly heaps.

Some five or six hundred cattle stood about the enclosure and from time to time an outburst of lowing swept from side to side. The quiet way the cattle stood told that they had been there for some time.

Phil swung out of saddle, strode to the fence, climbed to the top rail and stood looking down on the herd.

"See there," he said quietly, pointing to the shoulder of a great steer. "What do you see there, Simms? What brand does he carry?"

Hard Rock looked. He could see no brand. In the place of any known brand a great blotch of black tar marked the steer.

"Somebody dropped a blot on his writin'," he said coolly.

"That's exactly what he did and he did it on purpose," said Phil. "Somebody tried to blot out the Lyin' Y brand and dropped some tar on it. Let's see what he wrote."

He balanced himself on the top rail of the fence and as the steer passed he neatly bulldogged him in the dust of the corral, seized a handful of gravel and scrubbed away the tar, disclosing a perfect Bar Chevron brand. He sprang aside and let the bawling steer scramble to its feet. Then he climbed to the top rail of the fence and sat there studying the herd while Hard Rock quietly observed him.

"Well," said Hard Rock presently. "What's the answer?"

"There's only one answer. Look there—" Phil pointed to the embers of a recently extinguished fire outside the corral gates. Someone had thrown water on that fire and the ashes were still wet. "They were doin' their work right here. They were heatin' runnin' irons in that fire and changin' the Lyin' Y into Bar Chevron."

"Have sense, man," said Hard Rock heatedly. "Them men with the wagon are Lyin' Y men. Why would they change the brands on Lyin' Y cows unless the cows had been sold?"

"That's what I'm gettin' at, old-timer. If Lyin' Y men are changin' the brands on their own cows it's because they're gettin' more money for Bar Chevron cows than they are for Lyin' Y stock. It's because someone is shippin' out Bar Chevron stock and pouchin' the cash and the Lyin' Y is being stripped. Crocker told me he suspected that."

"They've probably been doin' that for some time," said Hard Rock. "Just like old man Crex's been doin' with that glory hole; strippin' it of ore and layin' up the money agin a rainy day."

"That's exactly it," said Phil. "The difficulty is going to be to prove it."

"SENOR . . . señor . . . Look there . . . ."

Pedro's voice recalled them both and they saw him pointing excitedly into the dusty corral. Half-hidden in the dust was a small, red leather-covered notebook. He knew instinctively what it was. He had

kept a hundred such notebooks himself. It was the tally-book of someone who had been keeping count of the stock in the corral. He secured it quickly and snatched it open while Hard Rock breathed down the back of his neck in a furtive attempt to see what it was.

"It looks like a list of some kind," said Hard Rock.

"It's better than that, old-timer. It's the tally book of someone who was keepin' count of all the cattle that have been handled right here in this corral. It's a count of all the Lyin' Y cows that have passed over to other owners."

He pored long over it, studying page after page that was filled with hastily written, well-nigh illegible entries. That flimsy notebook contained less than fifty pages, but every page was packed with dynamite.

It was all clear to him now. Lying Y cattle had been rounded up by the Lying Y men under orders, of course, from the Lying Y manager.

He knew this was what had been done, but he could not prove it. This tally-book told him exactly how many cattle had been looted from the Lying Y. There might be other corrals; other men who had done the same thing. He stood studying this book with its damning record, but while his eyes held to the written page his active brain was busy miles away.

Ben Crocker back on the Cross Bar had told him long ago how Sam Marks and Leo Crex had been working together for years looting the Lying Y, but he had not entirely believed old Ben. Now he knew that Ben had told him something less than the actual facts.

He found himself wondering what this girl, Ellen Mathis, co-owner with him of the Lying Y, could be like. He found himself re-living rapidly every incident since his arrival in Amargo Valley. For a moment he overlooked the fact that he himself was part owner of the ranch that was being robbed.

But much more than mere stealing was involved. Murder had been done and Hard Rock Simms, an innocent man, was to be railroaded for the crime. He knew now the details of the planned last theft. That final stroke, if carried out, would totally ruin the Lying Y and would leave Crex and Marks supreme in Amargo Valley. And the girl would be helpless in their hands. He read that book again and turned the cover and read, "D. Dyer."

"This man Dyer who owns this book has sure got some plain and fancy explainin' to do if I can get my hands on him," he said. "This shows he's a Lyin' Y man and this is his tally-book. It runs back for two years. If this book tells the truth then they've swiped about every head of stock the Lyin' Y can lay claim to."

"I reckon that's about right," grunted Hard Rock. "I know Dyer. He's been with Marks quite a spell. I can't say he'd go plumb to hell fer a nickel but I do say he'll fish round the edges o' hell till he falls in."

"All right. This man Dyer's the man we want, but I don't just see how I can get to him. I'll find a way, though. But that'll come later. Before I take that matter up, I've got to get into Pintano and see the Recorder of Brands there. I must get some data and be sure of it."

"Yeah. That'll be right bright. The minute you show up in Pintano, you'll be pinched as sure as shootin'," Hard Rock said.

"Wait a bit," Phil laughed. "When you find a prairie on fire you do one of two things. You either ride like hell and get out of the way, or else you back-fire. We'll back-fire this time on old man Crex. I want to get Girton out of Pintano for a couple of days so I can make some inquiries there without danger of bein' arrested. Suppose I send a letter by Pedro to-morrow to Girton? Won't that help?"

"Depends on what you write in that letter," said Hard Rock cautiously. "And he may arrest Pedro. What'll you write him?"

"Here's what I'm plannin' to write," said Phil. "Hard Rock Simms and his men have been rounded up by my men and I am holding them at Trecientos Ranch for payment of the reward. I will turn them over to you when you send the five hundred dollars you told me would be paid. Signed," said Phil grinning, "with the name of Mr. Leo Crex."

"My gosh," said Hard Rock soulfully, "that letter will take Girton and his posse over to Trecientos, fightin' mad. It may start a fight between him an' Crex. Anyhow each will think the other has double-crossed him and neither will believe the other. It'll take Girton two days to ride over to Crex's and he'll come back

with his ponies wore to a frazzle. There's two things you got to see to, though, before you send that letter. You got to be sure Girton is in Pintano and that Leo Crex is *not* there."

"I'll put it up to Pedro," said Phil.

When matters were explained to Pedro he could hardly wait to start.

"You write the letter, señor," he said, grinning broadly. "I will see that the sheriff gets it. If that letter does not draw him to Trecientos then flies no longer care for molasses. Señor, indeed when I left the service of Señor Crocker to accompany you, I had no idea you were such an accomplished liar."

"By golly," quoth Hard Rock. "That's a hot one. When a Mexican congratulates a man on bein' a good liar or a skillful horse-thief it sure means somethin'. How will you give the letter to that man Girton, Pedro?"

"See now, señores. I will enter Pintano by night. I will find a man I know and I will learn from him where the sheriff is. If he is still out of Pintano, with his posse, seeking us, I will wait till he returns. It will take him two days to reach Pintano. Or one long day at least. It depends on how they ride. The moment he starts for Trecientos I will start for the Caves with word for you. It cannot fail."

"All right. I'll make a copy of the letter."

Phil tore a page from that notebook, spread it on his saddle-horn and wrote rapidly.

"I hate like the devil to sign another man's name — especially as I've never seen his signature," he laughed. "If Girton knows Crex's scrawl it may not fool him. Read it out, Hard Rock, and tell me if you can improve it."

Both Hard Rock and Pedro censored that screed and Phil handed the little Mexican some money.

"You are taking a big risk for me, Pedro," he said. "See to it *mi amigo* that this man Girton does not take you. It would be an evil day for me if you came to grief while on an errand for me."

"Señor . . . ." Pedro's voice changed. "You are doing what I would give my heart's blood to do. Look for me to-morrow night."

He swung into saddle and urged his horse along the trail to Pintano and they watched him till the floating dust-wreaths swallowed him.

CHAPTER X

Phil Makes His Plans

FIVE men squatting on the rocky floor of Twin Caves watched the lower trail for signs or sounds of the returning Pedro. Hard Rock varied his watching with attentions to a pot of beans cooking over a fire and occasional trips to the entrance where Phil lay with his chin cupped in his hands studying the canyon.

"Yonder he comes, I think . . . ." He loosed a hand and jerked it toward the canyon where a tiny black spot appeared on the distant edge. It looked like a tiny black bead sliding down a brown string and it presently disappeared in the green level of the canyon floor.

A half hour later they heard a soft shuffle below them. They watched Pedro urge his pony up the steep path. Then he stabled the horse and came to them carrying his saddle that he flung into his sleeping place.

"Señor," he said quietly, "the letter was delivered as you ordered."

Phil exploded. "Confound you, Pedro," he said. "You're too darned concise. Talk, man. Tell me what you did."

"Bueno, señor." Pedro rolled a cigarette, squatted far back from the fire and waved at the cave entrance. "Better let the fire die at dark," he said. "Men from Pintano are seeking for us. The place is not the old time Pintano, señores. I will tell you. First I stopped for a drink at the saloon El Frente Azul—the Blue Front. I went there, señor, not for the drink but for the talk that flows over a full cup.

"I learned there that the sheriff was in Pintano at that time. He and his men have been searching every canyon for our trail but have found no sign. It was luck that took us over into the Bulso de Diablo. They were drawing this very canyon the days we were gone. Now they will not return here.

"Pintano has gone stark crazy, señor. Someone has given out news that gold has been found in the Espinazos. That word has gone abroad and every half-drunken prospector with half a peso to buy a pack burro is heading for the place. It is a gold rush, señor. It is a gold rush such as I have seen once and do not wish to see again."

"Abe Gray done that," growled Hard Rock. "Gray had took a hatful of ore

samples out o' that sack before Sheriff Girton arrested him."

"I'm glad he did," said Phil. "It'll put a bad crimp in Crex and Marks. With a thousand prospectors loose in the Espinazos those two thieves can't get away with their plans. They'll have to be more careful and that'll give us time. Go on, Pedro."

"When I learned that Girton was in Pintano, señor, I went to see a cousin of mine; one Vicente Romero. He is a very close relative, señor. His first wife's brother's wife was third cousin to my grandmother so you can see there is a blood connection."

Hard Rock scratched his head and looked doubtful and Phil was taken aback, but Pedro went on:

"Vicente told me the sheriff and his men had just returned and that he would deliver the letter. I went with him and saw, through the open door, the sheriff take the letter. They were all in the office and I have never heard men curse as they cursed before Vicente gave the letter. It seems that they had picked up a trail of shod horses and followed it for two days. It was a wrong trail. It was the trail of men on round-up and it led to the big corral where we were."

"I see." Phil laughed. "Those men were probably Lyin' Y men who had been stealin' their own cattle for Crex."

"I think so, señor. Then Vicente gave the letter and the men all crowded about him while he read it. I have been a sinful man. I have consorted with men who use the name of God in talk but I have never heard such talk.

"I think it made the sheriff's mouth very sore. I saw him spit blood afterwards. I waited in the morning to see them actually start for Trecientos. Then I came here."

"They must have made a mighty late start." Phil glanced at his watch.

Pedro grinned apologetically.

"That was not their fault, señor. Vicente got some nails and we drove one in a foot of each horse. Not much, señor. We just touched the quick so as to lame them and make them go tenderly as a horse might after long travel on rocky land. It will be late when they reach Trecientos and then there will be a quarrel with Crex. And Pintano is boiling. You can go there safely."

"Good. I will go at once. I can get there by dark, see the Brand Inspector and get back before Girton returns. I'll go alone. Pedro, get me that big bay horse that we took from Crex's man, Pym, over in the Devil's Pocket. He's not much good but he wears the Trecientos brand as big as a circus poster and that may confuse 'em some if they see me."

In ten minutes Pedro was back with the horse, a big rangy bay with a fiddle head and a bad temper and Phil saddled him and led him to the trail's edge. Hard Rock shook his head disapprovingly as the bay scuttled down the slope.

"I don't like it a l'il' bit," he muttered. "The minute you mix up with strange cattle you git in one hell of a mess but I reckon he knows his own business."

That business was taking definite form in Phil's brain. For the first time the idea came to him that the looting of the Lying Y Ranch might be, probably was, of really minor importance. Pedro's words were like a challenge. Pintano was in the throes of a gold-rush. Then the story of gold in the Espinazos was true. Those claims that he and Hard Rock had just staked out might be of real value. The place must be rich or Leo Crex would never have committed murder to keep men from knowing about it.

HE moved down the trail at a fast walk and climbed to the low mesa heading southward toward Pintano. The flat lands opened out into a broad plain dotted with mesquite clumps heavy with the long, sweet algaroba beans that cattle love. That range, he reflected, ought to be covered with cattle, but he saw none. He knew now where they were. Besser had told him enough to substantiate old Crocker's guess.

No mesa is entirely flat; this one consisted of dips and draws and grassy swales deep enough to hide a thousand cattle and he kept to those low lands to escape any observation from men of the Lying Y who might be abroad. He owned half of that ranch, he reflected grimly. And he decided that when he had solved this problem there would be a day of reckoning for Leo Crex and this man Marks. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he did not hear the *swish* of a horse moving through the lush grass; then a man's voice suddenly hailed him.

"Howdy, stranger. Kind o' offen yore range, ain't yuh?"

Phil turned quickly and instinctively pulled the bay to a halt.

"I don't know about that," he said easily. "All ranges are my ranges — till they're fenced."

He gave a quick comprehensive glance at the man and did not like what he saw. A thin hatchet face was scarred from brow to chin with a long white mark that looked like a knife cut years old. A thin-lipped unsmiling mouth closed sharply like the slit in a mail box and gray eyes stared unwinkingly at him. The man was not tall but very square and he sat his saddle with a peculiar posture, as though his left leg hurt him.

"I see you're ridin' a Trecientos horse," he said tersely.

"Well," said Phil combatively. "I don't care a damn what you see. It's not my business what you see."

"It is on this range," said the stranger sharply. "I happen to be Marks, manager of the Lyin' Y Ranch and these grounds are my feedin' grounds. Have you been at Trecientos?"

"Where I've been is none of your business," said Phil. "If Leo Crex chooses to take a new man on, I figure—"

"Oh, I see."

Phil was sure Marks drew a breath of relief.

"I was pretty sure when I saw you ridin' that Trecientos horse that you was one o' Crex men but I had to be certain. You know Crex pretty well?"

"I think I may say that I know Mister Leo Crex very well indeed," said Phil with perfect truth.

"I know that horse. Pym rides him. He doesn't let every man fork that cayuse."

"That's funny," said Phil. "He didn't make any objection to my taking him. I was over in the Devil's Pocket yesterday and—"

"Oh . . . ." Marks drew another breath of great relief. "So you know all about that glory hole, too, eh?"

"Sure I do. Crex hasn't hidden a thing from me. Since you're Mister Marks of the Lyin' Y, I may as well take up this matter with you. It's this matter of Dyer—"

At that name Marks gave a great gulp and he looked again at Phil, whose face was a mask. The work that Marks had given Dyer to do was private and confidential. Dyer had chosen his own men and was responsible for results.

"What do you know about Dyer?" he asked. "Has he been talkin' to you?"

"No. I never saw Dyer in my life. That is, I haven't seen him yet. I want to see him."

"Then Leo Crex has been talkin' to you," said Marks. "Is that it?"

"Where else would I have got my information from?" demanded Phil. "Mister Crex is countin' on gettin' quite a good-sized herd from you."

"It'll run close to five thousand," said Marks. "You tell Crex that I hope to start five thousand head across the pass on the twentieth of the month. He must hold the girl till he hears from me and—"

"Yeah," said Phil shortly. "I know all about that."

"All right. Then Walter Crex will meet the girl on the eighteenth. He'll take her to Trecientos instead of to the Lyin' Y and she'll be kept there till we make the drive. Mind you, tell Crex that the herd will be over the night of the twentieth. Tell him, too, that Lynn Davis saw me about makin' the survey of the lines of Trecientos.

"I'm to help him make the survey. He wants to begin on the twentieth or twenty-first. That'll work in all right. It'll be just after we run the herd across the pass. It's got to be done as soon as we can. Some fool gave out word to the outside that gold had been discovered in the Espinazo Hills and there's a gold rush started. The town is full o' fools startin' for the hills."

"I know all about that too," said Phil.

"You do? Then Crex knows about the gold rush? Then you know that old Crex—"

"Has been milkin' that glory hole of his for years," said Phil. He drew his bow at a venture but he banked on what Hard Rock had told him. And that shaft found its bull's eye. He went on, "He got scared when he saw Scotty Rames and Hard Rock Simms over there. Then when Simms shot Rames—"

Marks burst into raucous laughter.

"He told you that too, did he?" he asked. "When you know old Leo Crex a bit better you'll know that he doesn't often tell the truth. I know more about that killin' than Crex thinks I do. He told me the same tale. Said he heard a blast go off over in the Bulso de Diablo.

Claimed he left his gun on his horse and went over on foot to see what the blast meant. Then he told how he seen Simms shoot his partner, Rames.

"Now, old Leo's been close-herdin' that place fer years and when Simms and Rames struck it, it scared Crex. He's been takin' out gold from there ever since he's been at Trecientos. Hell, man! Your boss Crex is no fool. I sent Red Dyer over to him with a letter that same day—"

"I know you did," said Phil, suddenly remembering what Besser had told him under protest. "You said the girl Ellen Mathis would be in Pintano on the eighteenth . . . ."

THOSE words resolved any slight remaining doubt that Sam Marks might have had. It was clear now that this stranger was deep in old Leo's councils. He could talk freely.

"Yeah," said Marks, grinning. "I sent Dyer over with that 'ere letter. When Dyer come back he told me he passed old Leo's horse on the trail at the entrance to the Bulso de Diablo. He knows the horse and he wondered what Crex could be doin' there on foot. But—here's the funny thing about it—Dyer swears there was no gun on the saddle. Leo Crex swears he left the gun on the horse."

"That's no news," said Phil quietly. "Everyone knows Crex killed Scotty Rames."

"O' course he did," Marks nodded curtly. "He had to, but he'll never admit it, of course. If he hadn't shot him and if he fails to git Hard Rock Simms, someone will sure as hell file claims on that place Crex has been workin' like his own mine.

"Be sure you tell Crex what I've told you," he said sharply. "Me an' Davis will re-run that line of Trecientos on the twentieth or twenty-first. After that he'll sure find the Bulso de Diablo on Trecientos land. It's a damned good thing he had a strangle hold on Davis. Be sure you tell him."

"All right," Phil nodded noncommittally. "Seems a little thing to waste time over, though, to me."

"He'd be a fool not to do it," said Marks. "For years he's been tryin' to find out who owns the Bulso de Diablo so he could buy it but he could never find the man. Leo says he wants the place to winter cattle. Get this straight, now. This is important.

"Tell Crex I say that when Walter meets that girl in Pintano on the eighteenth and takes her to Trecientos, he must keep her there till he hears from me. Gettin' them cattle together takes more time 'n I counted on. Where you goin'?" he asked as Phil pushed his horse past him.

"I've got a little business of my own to attend to before I go back. I'll be movin' on, I reckon."

The moment Phil crossed the next ridge and was hidden from sight he turned at a right angle to his old course and rode due east. He needed time to think and he did not want Marks to know where he was going.

As a matter of fact he need not have considered Marks. The Lying Y manager had troubles enough of his own to keep him busy. He was worried about that talk about Dyer. He had trusted Dyer because he had to and now it looked as though Dyer had been either careless or indiscreet. He did not want Leo Crex to know how many cows the Lying Y had rebranded.

Complications might easily ensue. Could this stranger have been sent over from Trecientos by Crex to investigate this very thing? He worried over that and he worried over Phil.

Once clear of the wide mesa that hid the Lying Y, Phil took a gallop and sent his horse along at a rapid gait.

AS he rode into the northern edge of Pintano, Phil reined in his horse and sat astounded at what he saw. A week before, Pintano had been just a small cow-town dependent for existence on its corrals and shipping pens and the fact that it was also the county seat. It had changed almost overnight. Abe Gray's messages to Stillwell had worked a miracle.

Pintano's vacant lots had disappeared as by magic. On every patch of arid ground that once would not even raise cucumbers, little wooden and canvas huts blistered in the hot wind. Wagons tented with dirty wagon sheets stood behind the houses and lines of tiny dirty tents backed into the streets.

At the railroad station a dozen wagons had halted by the water-tanks where the enterprising agent was selling water at

desert rates — a dollar per bucket. A dozen new saloons had opened and the board walk was filled with a hurrying, jostling crowd intent on quickly outfitting for a dash into the hills from which they were to return—rich. Jerry Plack was doing a thriving trade and every saloon vomited forth its quota of half-drunken men. Behind the tents and houses a hundred loose burros pawed empty cans and nosed the garbage heaps that stunk in the heat. Phil stared at the sight astounded.

"My Lord," he muttered. "If this is a gold rush, give me a little slice o' hell for choice. I better see Gray first."

He hardly recognized Gray. The little assayer was in his element and fell on Phil with a shout of recognition and joy. He dragged him into the back-office and uncorked a bottle of fair whiskey; then he began to talk.

"Yeah, I did it," he chortled. "That's what that damned old fool Crex got for steppin' on my toes. I'd like Hard Rock Simms to know what he found up there in the Espinazos."

"He knows all right," said Phil. "He and I staked out some claims up there. I'm glad you told this to the world, Gray. You've set a thousand men to watch old man Crex and Masters, too." And he told Gray all that had happened.

The little asayer sat with bulging eyes.

"You mean to tell me," he said finally, "that that old devil Crex did all this?"

"That's only a part of what he's done," said Phil. "I'm not especially interested in Crex beyond wanting to clear old Hard Rock of that outrageous charge of murder that Crex made. Then I want to keep Crex and Marks of the Lyin' Y from lootin' what they've left of the ranch. Miss Mathis is due here on the eighteenth."

"Huh. And this is the sixteenth," said Gray thoughtfully, whereat Phil started visibly.

"My Lord," he muttered. "I sure have got mixed in my dates. I thought this was the fourteenth."

"You had your nerve coming right into town. Don't you know Girton is on your trail?"

"Sure I know it. I wish I never had anything in life to bother me more. Look here, Gray. Who's the inspector of brands here?"

"Lonigan," said Gray. "He's most likely over at the Malpais Saloon right now. There've been some complaints that some of these miners are killin' cattle fer grub and sellin' the hides."

Phil grunted. In any cattle country no owner objects to a calf being killed for food in case of dire necessity provided the killer leaves the hide. This is *prima facie* evidence that the calf has not been driven off for sale. Phil knew that if the miners had begun to kill cattle this early in the year there would be big trouble when cold weather came.

"I'm goin' to hunt up Lonigan," he said, and he headed for the Malpais Saloon.

THE long bar was in a turmoil. Three bartenders strove to hear shouted orders. A hundred men strove for places at the bar and surged about the games of chance that lined the opposite side of the long room where faro, chuck-a-luck and roulette machines were running full blast.

At the far end of the room a man ran a Chinese policy game with a huge glass wheel and a big blackboard. In a small room partitioned off by a three-foot wainscot, some men played at stud poker and their game was frequently interrupted by shouts for the bartenders and by helpful suggestions from onlookers.

A few drunks who had been in the place since dawn still hung like bar-flies to the counter hoping for free drinks. Phil bought a drink and asked a question of the nearest bartender.

"You know Mister Lonigan?"

"Sure. That's him just gettin' his coat off to sit in the game."

Phil headed for the poker table and stopped the big man about to seat himself.

"I won't detain you a minute, Mister Lonigan," he said politely. "I've been told you keep the cattle brand records. Is that correct?"

"Yes. What of it?" said Lonigan, who was in a hurry. "Are you a prospector?"

"Well, I suppose I am in a sort of way. I happened to see a lot of cattle that're in a bad way. They were penned up, in a log corral. Plenty of water but mighty little forage. Some were branded with a brand I've never seen before but then I'm new to the country. I'd call it a Bar-Diamond-Bar. There were some others marked with a Bar-Chevron, too."

"That's Sam Marks's brand," said Lonigan.

"Then I saw quite a lot that carried a queer brand. I been in the cattle business quite a spell, Mister Lonigan. This brand was the Lying Y changed into the Bar Chevron. Done with a running iron through a wet cloth so's to wire-brand 'em."

"Huh. If you've really seen that, my office will be greatly interested—tomorrow though. This is after office hours. What're you after? A reward?"

"Hell, no," said Phil. "I'm tellin' you what's wrong. You can take it or leave it. Is this game open to strangers?"

The big dealer heaved himself out of his chair.

"Friend," he said, "if you got any cash, you're as welcome as the flowers in May. I been playin' here sence Tuesday an' I've done lost near all I had. Ten thousand dollars, and the hell of it is that a dollar sixty-seven cents was cash. You want cards?"

"Sure." Phil sat down and thrust some gold pieces across the table and stacked his chips as he studied the faces of his antagonists. Lonigan he had already seen. Jetter, the editor of Pintano's only paper, was there with Force, a railroad contractor, and a big stranger whose name Phil did not catch.

The last was a big red-headed man, as hairy as a badger and apparently about as pleasant tempered. Phil guessed his temper from the sardonic lift of his upper lip as he shifted a cigar from side to side with a roll of his tongue, squinting his eyes against the tobacco smoke.

"Your ante you—" he said pleasantly as Phil sat down and gathered his cards. Phil gave him one sharp glance to assure himself that the man was sober enough to play that cutthroat game, and sorted his cards. The next minute the game began.

CHAPTER XI

The Game at the Malpais

THE low partition between the poker players and the main bar seemed to create an artificial silence. On one side of that partition the silence was broken only by the sliding sounds of the dealt cards and an occasional low-voiced word from a player. On the far side loud voices strove one above another as men partially drunk strove to become entirely so.

"Two cards . . . ."

"Cards? What the hell are you talkin' about? This is stud, not draw!"

"Make it draw. Give a man a chance fer his white alley!"

"All right. New deal, then . . . ."

The ante was placed, the bet made. The stranger leaned across the table, quietly discarded, ran his three cards together and picked up the cards that Jetter dealt him. Force grinned into his hand and quietly waited. The bet was "seen," raised, ran around the table again, and the pot grew larger.

"I straddle it twenty."

The big stranger neatly stacked his chips and shifted his cigar with his tongue. Then Jetter, with a good-natured oath, dropped out and Phil covered the bet.

"I call you," he said lightly. "What've you got?"

The man laid down three deuces and a pair of fives.

"Is that good?" he asked, grinning.

"It's good, all right. The only trouble is it's not quite good enough—for these." And Phil laid down four tens and raked in the pot. The man laughed and reached under his vest for his money-belt.

"That's the way it goes," he chuckled. "Damn these here money-belts," he said as he hooked a finger into a belt-pocket and extracted some gold pieces.

"Hurry up, man!" Jetter passed the cards. "You got a name, stranger? Not that it makes a damned bit o' difference, but it comes in handy in a cyard game."

"Name? Who me? Sure I got a name. Dave Sturton. You don't know me 'cause why I on'y came in yestiddy on the train. Burro train, you know . . . . Yeah"—he nodded to Jetter. "Give me five cards. Five, I said."

He took the cards, thrust a handful of chips to the center of the table and a moment later watched them swell Phil's pile.

"Your deal, Lonigan."

LONIGAN dealt with slow accuracy, and carefully studied his cards while Jetter and Force went hurriedly to the bar for more money. Word had got abroad in the main bar of the killing game, and from time to time men left their drinks and studied the play above the low partition. Finally Sturton, vic-

tim of a run of hard luck that would have staggered Monte Carlo, held up his hand.

"New cards," he shouted. "Lordy, man! Give a man a chanct. Hi, Benson! Bring some fresh cards."

Benson, the bartender, got a fresh pack. Sturton seized them, stripped off the cover and slapped them down on the table.

"I been playin' your darned game till I done lost the hem off my shirt," he growled. "Now play my game. *Mistagris.* How about you, Jetter?

"All right with me," said Jetter. "But it's cold-blooded murder."

They laughed and agreed, but Phil said nothing. This was his night and he felt he could not lose even at mistagris, that murderous poker game in which the Joker is "wild." Men do not play that game on ordinary occasions just as men drinking whiskey do not take brandy for a chaser. Then Lonigan rose.

"You'll have to let me out," he said frankly. "I'm not a rich man and I've lost my limit. She's too rich for my blood."

As he passed beyond the partition a man shouldered him aside and crowded him into the enclosure.

"Hello, Jetter," he shouted. "Got room for some fresh coin? Any objection to my hornin' in?"

Jetter glanced up and Phil felt every hair on his neck rise at his reply.

"Hello, Crex! I didn't know you were in Pintano. How's Trecientos?"

Then Jetter turned to his companions. "This is Mr. Walter Crex," he said. "His old man owns the big Trecientos rancho and the son is achin' to contribute to the kitty. Any objections?"

There were none. Men are rare who object to a fresh supply of cash and nearly all the chips had drifted to Phil's elbow.

"You know Force already, I reckon," said Jetter. "Sturton here is one of the men who came in with the gold rush—"

Sturton!

That name seemed a shot in Walter Crex's ears. That was the name of the man who owned the "scrip" that gave him title to the land they wanted for the Trecientos Ranch! The land of the Devil's Pocket where old Leo Crex had sunk his glory hole from which he had wildcatted a fortune! This was such luck as Walter Crex had never dreamed of. But his hard face gave no sign as Jetter went on.

"I can't introduce this man"—he indicated Phil—"but I swear he can play poker."

"Bueno!" laughed Sturton. "I reckon a man don't need a name if he's backed by the U. S. mint. Go ahead and deal the cards."

The newly dealt hands fell in a little ripple of softly slurring sound and a dozen men leaning over the partition waited to see what would happen.

The very gods of luck seemed to sit at Phil's elbow that night. Drink after drink called for by the others seemed to have no more effect on him than so much buttermilk.

Phil sensed a change of atmosphere but he could not define it. Antagonism grew as the chips changed hands. Jetter's losses made him sullen. Force waxed sarcastic. Crex was on edge, ready at a moment to resent the slightest word, Phil as impassive as a stone boulder. Only Sturton seemed to care little whether Fortune frowned or smiled on him.

"There—" He flung a twenty-dollar gold piece into the pot. "I've been fattenin' that damned kitty all evenin'. She's mighty nigh ready to bust. I wish I had back all the money that's been spent in those damned Espinazo hills."

"You been here before?" queried Force.

"Not me. But I knew old Barton. He was one o' the vice-presidents of the old Maricopa Minin' Company when she went busted. He got in a kind of a jam. You all know how the Maricopa failed, I reckon?"

"Know?" Jetter laughed grimly. "They paid their president fifty thousand a year and they never struck pay-dirt. Not once. They paid seven per cent dividends just as long as the chambermaids in Los Angeles bought stock at ten cents a share. Then they went busted an' Barton went to jail."

"That's right. That's where I came in," laughed Sturton. "Barton sold everything he had to hire a lawyer and I bought me the scrip fer the whole damned tract when they gave it up. You see they was only holdin' it on minin' claims. That's what brung me here. That land may not be worth the fifteen cents an acre I'm payin' fer it. It don't look like gold country to me."

"Gold is where you find it," said Force, repeating the old-time miners' axiom

that has ruined more men that it ever helped. "They tell me that, by an' large, about thirteen dollars is put into the ground for every dollar that is taken out. I stick to railroad contracts. . . . I'm passin'," he said after a hasty glance at his hand.

"Me too . . . ." Jetter slid his cards together and sat back by Walter Crex, who had also left the game.

That kitty was piled high with chips and paper money and gold coins that overflowed to the table's edge, and was eyed covetously by a dozen onlookers.

"Some men sure play in luck," quoth a man who had limped into Pintano behind three lame burros from Old Mexico. "What's that fool doin' now?"

Sturton, whose fingers groped in his money-belt and came out empty, grinned at Phil, who added a handful of chips to the kitty.

"How much you raisin' me?" demanded Sturton.

Phil studied his hand and then glanced at Sturton's grinning face; then he swept the entire heap of his winnings to the center of the table.

"Suit you?" he asked.

"MY God!" said an onlooker reverently. "How much is that kitty?"

Sturton, too, wanted to know that. He found out. There was four thousand dollars in that pile.

"I ain't got four thousand," said Sturton, "but I'm curious as hell, stranger. I tell you what I'll do. I got all them papers I bought off Barton in my pocket; the scrip fer that land in the Espinazos!" He reached into a pocket and brought out a roll of folded papers that he flung at Phil, who opened them and glanced at them casually. "Maybe that there's a gold mine," said Sturton. "Heaven knows. If God put gold there, it's there. That's all I know. Is it a go?"

"What is it?" asked Phil, and at his tone even Jetter, who had gone to sleep, woke up.

"It's like I said. It's the scrip fer all that land up in the Espinazos. The tract o' land that the Maricopa Minin' Company used to own before they all went to jail. I never been there and I ain't like to go unless I win that pot. Take it er leave it, stranger."

"Give him a run for his money," hiccoughed Force over a drink. "Win the pot and you own a whole mountain. Lose it an'—"

"Even if there ain't any gold there," said Sturton, "you kin cut up the old diggin's into post holes an' sell 'em to the dry farmers."

"Play her as she lays," said Phil.

"Wait—"

Walter Crex came suddenly to life. His drinks had made him sleepy but he had missed little of what had taken place. The thing was very clear to him. This man Sturton was the man his father had hunted for years to buy that scrip from, and now that paper that meant a colossal fortune was being hurled into a pot in which he did not even hold cards.

This very scrip that Sturton was gambling so lightly was the potential title to the Bulso de Diablo that his father had been "milking" for years. By hook or by crook, he must get those papers.

"Wait," he said again. "I'm a pretty good gambler. I'll take a chance on that paper. I'll give you cash for them."

He seized the roll of papers from the kitty and began to pull a roll of bills from his pocket.

"I've got the money here," he said.

"Hold on—" Phil's grip tightened on Crex's wrist and bent it back till it cracked loudly. "You dropped out of this game, Mister Crex. You can't come in again till a new hand is dealt."

"You damned fool. I'm offerin' cash—"

"All the same, my word goes. This hand is a private bet between Mister Sturton and myself. You're out. Stay out."

"I'm offerin' this cash to you for those papers, Sturton," said Walter Crex hotly. "Will you sell that paper for four thousand cash?"

"Good heaven, yes!" And Sturton held out a hand for the cash.

But again Phil blocked the deal. He knew that Walter Crex would never have offered four thousand unless those papers were worth much more.

"Sorry, Mister Crex," he said grimly, "but that paper belongs in the kitty and it stays there. When you dropped out of the deal you relinquished all interest in the pot till next deal. We'll play her as she lays," he said sharply, "and Crex is not in it."

"You damned road-agent!" Crex sprang to his feet and his voice rose

shrilly. "You think you can come here and dictate to men who made this place. Who the hell are you, anyhow?"

"Call you," said Sturton.

Phil said not a word but quietly laid cards upon the table. The ace of clubs and four queens.

Sturton grinned sourly and laid down. A full house. Nine's full.

Phil raked in the pot, stowed the cash in his belt, thrust the roll of scrip into the breast pocket of his coat, and rose from his seat.

"Who the hell are you anyhow?" demanded Walter Crex again and his voice cracked. He had overplayed his hand this time. What he could not even guess was that Phil knew the full value of that roll of paper. This was the answer to Phil's problem. So this man Sturton had held title to the land about the Bulso de Diablo!

That was why old Leo Crex had had to wild-cat the mine. That was why Crex had not filed claims on the place. Now he himself had a double title. He not only owned this scrip but he and Hard Rock had staked out their claims to the place and had even incorporated the old glory hole in their claims. He stowed away his winnings and was rising from his seat when a cracked voice wheezed out:

"I kin tell you damn well who he is. He's Paul Kitts. He's the man what locked me an' yore daddy and Sheriff Girton up in the jail an' made the jail delivery. That's who he is. The sheriff's huntin' fer him right now."

And Dante Alighieri Botts, the fat old turnkey, waddled into the enclosure. His little pig's eyes glittered with hate and sweat ran in streams down his purple face as he forced his way through the crowd and laid a heavy detaining hand on Phil's arm.

"I'm arrestin' you right now," he said. "I reckon this time I'll put you away where you'll stay put."

Phil's next act came almost quicker than lightning. Phil wrenched his arm loose, stooped behind the card table, seized an end of the heavy black-and-white Navajo blanket on the floor. Then he threw his whole weight upon it and jerked.

The next moment card table, Dante Alighieri Botts, Sturto, Jetter and Crex rolled upon the floor in a revolving cocoon of spitting profanity. Then Phil's hand shot up. A flash and roar from his gun brought down the great swinging lamp, and that end of the room was plunged into darkness.

A series of shouts went up from the barroom. Men who had run up accounts there all evening promptly faded away. A dozen voices shouted for lights and while those lights were forthcoming two men quietly looted the roulette and faro banks. When partial quiet came, when a smoky lamp smoked and stunk in the half gloom, Mister Botts took account of stock.

"Table leg's busted," he said gloomily. "So's mine, I think. Walter Crex looks like a pony kicked him in the jaw. I got my hand skinned in the shuffle and that devil got plumb away—"

"Yeah," Sturton shouted in riotous laughter. "I'm all fer him. He's a real man. Dog my cats ef he ain't outsmarted the whole bunch."

"Git after him," shouted Botts. "Sheriff Girton'll pay five hundred dollars fer him, dead or alive."

THAT was enough to arouse all Pintano. The Malpais alone spewed forth fifty men. Men ran into men; men tried to arrest wholly innocent persons, but of the guilty one there was no sign.

The moment that lamp dropped in fragments Phil leaped for the side door. Only Walter Crex stood in the way and he was immediately sorry. A quick jab to the jaw sent him against Jetter, who did not like him anyhow. The darkness gave Jetter an opportunity that he did not attempt to resist, and Crex went down in the darkness, while Phil leaped over him into the street.

He was too wise to run. He turned into the main street and strolled unconcernedly to the first corner; then he walked to Gray's office and found Gray. He had a green shade over his eyes, and was poring over a retort on a gas flame. Phil told him what had happened and Gray listened intently. Then he went to the door, listened, and came back grinning. "Sounds like all hell's broke lose at the Malpais. I guess you need your horse, eh? I'll git him for you. Where is he?"

"In front of Plack's store. By the way, Marks told me that he and Davis are to make a survey of the Trecientos Ranch. I gather from what he said that Crex has got some kind of a hold over Davis and

that there's some crooked work on foot to change the Trecientos line so the Devil's Pocket land will lie inside the Trecientos grant."

"That sounds like Crex," commented Gray. "I bet you're right. I'll get your horse."

"Hurry up," said Phil. "Listen here, Gray. Hard Rock and I staked out some claims up there. Your name is in our pot from now on. See?"

"Much obliged," grunted Gray. "I'll hurry all I can and you better ride like hell to get into the hills as soon as you can."

In five minutes he was back with the horse and in ten minutes Phil, passing down the back line of the houses, was swallowed up in the gloom and headed for Twin Caves.

The soft slurring of the horse on the uphill slope roused Hard Rock. He took the horse, passed the rope to Zeno, and handed Phil a quart cup of coffee.

"Well?" he asked. "What's new?"

"A whole lot. Look here, Hard Rock—" He laid on Hard Rock's knee the roll of scrip that he had won from Sturton and told him what he had learned from Marks.

"He saw the Trecientos brand on the horse," he said, and he got the idea. I was one of Leo Crex's men, so he spilled all the beans. He confirmed what I'd heard—that Miss Mathis, half-owner of the Lying Y, is to arrive here on the eighteenth. He thought I was one of the Trecientos men, you see. Marks and Crex have planned the whole thing beautifully. Marks is rounding up about five thousand head of Lying Y cattle—about the last, I reckon.

"That was the meanin' of the cattle in the corral. That's what Dyer's tally-book meant. Walter Crex is to meet the girl and take her over to Trecientos, lettin' her believe she's at the Lying Y. She's new out here and will never know the difference.

"In the meantime old Crex is doin' his damndest to get some kind of a title to that Devil's Pocket land where the gold is. He's got Davis to resurvey the Trecientos line so's to throw the Devil's Pocket on his ranch.

"And now Sturton turns up and I win the scrip to that land and have a clear title to it. See?"

"Of course I see," said Hard Rock. "Think I'm blind? But I don't see that helps me none."

"What in the world do you mean? Don't help you? Why don't it help you?"

"What d'you reckon I'm after in this here deal?" demanded Hard Rock hotly. "Gold? Hell, boy, I kin find gold wherever gold is, but a man don't find a partner like Scotty Rames every day. I want the man who murdered my partner. All right. My time'll come. What now? We've got to do somethin', an' do it quick."

"Tomorrow is the eighteenth," said Phil. "That man Walter Crex is in Pintano to meet that Miss Mathis. God help the girl who gets into the Crex's hands. I reckon the best thing we can do is to help her."

"How in the world will you do that?" demanded Hard Rock.

"All we need do is to lay in wait for Crex and Miss Mathis on the Trecientos trail," said Phil warmly. "We can hold them up and tell her exactly what we know. That'll put her wise, anyhow."

"Yeah. That's a good plan," said Hard Rock heartily. "That train gits to Pintano about seven in the morning. If Crex starts as soon as they have had breakfast, he'll hit the steep part of the trail about noon. You an' me and Pedro will be enough to make Walter Crex sick."

CHAPTER XII

Ellen Mathis Arrives

WALTER CREX thrust his way through the crowd of sight-seers on the platform of the Pintano station as Number Three roared around the curve at the eastern end of the yards, and with a sheet of sparks from each wheel slid to a roaring halt. Two weeks earlier Pintano had been a flag-stop for through trains. Now it was an important stop for two divisions.

That station platform was crowded. Men who had seen but one or two trains in their lives rubbed shoulders with men who had brought in freight cars loaded with roulette tables and barrels of "trade whiskey" ready for sale after being properly cut with strong alkali water from the railway tanks. The old-timers in Pintano had taken back seats, and the newly arrived element was in the saddle.

A jam of men hurried from the smoking-car with packs and rolls that told

their callings. That find of gold in the Espinazos had set the Western world afire and these were the embers up-flung by the conflagration.

"Look at 'em, will you!" Jerry Plack, drawn to the station by uncontrollable curiosity, clawed at Walter Crex's arm. "Every damned man expectin' to make his everlastin' fortune. The minute you holler 'gold' every man thinks you mean him. How's the old man, Walter?"

"What the hell is that to you?" demanded Walter hotly. He did not like Plack because he knew too much and talked too loosely, and had the same low regard for Walter that he had for Leo Crex.

"Well," said Jerry, "you know I run a general store. When I come into my store an' find the big noise from Trecientos tied up and laid under my counter like a dead hog with a piece o' dirty paper in his mouth— When I hear that the man who tied him up is the same man who done locked him up in the jail with the sheriff; well, to tell the truth I'm jest a li'l' bit curious to know how's the old man standin' the strain.

"Last time I seen him he bought two hundred foot o' new lariat rope offen me and he looked like he'd busted a blood-vessel."

"The less talkin' you do the better for your fool neck," said Walter viciously. He was angry beyond words. His failure to get that scrip for the title to the Bulso de Diablo rankled like salt on a new cut.

That man Paul Kitts had beaten him at every turn. He had locked Leo Crex up in jail. He had tied up the biggest man in Amargo Valley. Tied him up like a slaughtered pig. And he had won and got away with the scrip that gave him title to the Devil's Pocket that Trecientos needed. No wonder Walter Crex was angry.

"Sheriff Girton will get that man Kitts and Hard Rock Simms," he snarled. "An' when he does, they'd better look out."

"Next time young Kitts meets up with 'em, he'll likely spank Girton and make your father stand in the corner with a dunce-cap on," said Plack.

He chuckled wheezingly and moved away. And Walter Crex was too wise to follow him. Three weeks before this he would have gone for his gun at those words of Plack's, secure in the knowledge that a man named Crex could get away with murder. But now he glanced furtively about him at the thought.

These hulking big men about him were not the men he had known. These were not men who, having lived for years under the shadow of Leo Crex's reputation, were alarmed thereby. These men had never heard of Leo Crex of Trecientos and frankly did not care a damn for him or his name.

If he went for his gun a dozen men would go for theirs. Besides that Walter was there for a particular purpose. To meet Ellen Mathis who was on this very train. He turned and found himself staring into the face of the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

Slate gray eyes shot with little hazel sparks looked into his, and a pair of very red lips parted a little in evident excitement as the girl stood in the midst of that roughly dressed crowd that surged about her. Her little head was held high with the same air of determination with which she had a week before forced a passage through the crowds at the Grand Central station in Manhattan.

The mark of Manhattan, too, was on her hat and tweed suit. For the rest he saw the curve of a smooth cheek and a well modeled chin.

"Can you direct me to a good hotel, please?" she asked.

Walter Crex did not remove his hat. That would have been a direct surrender to tenderfoot manners as he knew them. He thought he stood for a type of virile Western manhood, whereas he stood solely for Trecientos rancho.

"Yeah," he said. "It's across the street." And he tilted his head toward the Drovers' Hotel that stood under two giant cottonwoods. "Best place in town," he said.

The engine groaningly gathered way and Walter Crex stood with his gaze centered on the Pullman coach. No other girl was there. No girl had left the train except this one, who was now striving unsuccessfully to induce a Mexican loafer to take her bag.

"Me no sabe." The man shook his head. "*Porque* the hell you no *habla* Inglees?"

Walter gave another look and slouched up to her.

"Is your name Mathis?" he asked.

"That's my last name. If you mean to ask if I am Miss Mathis, I am," she

said with sufficient emphasis as to make even Walter Crex feel that a liberty had been taken.

"Then that's all right," he said. "You know Sam Marks of the Lyin' Y Ranch, don't you? He sent me in to meet you and to bring you out to the ranch."

ELLEN MATHIS looked Walter over with cool gray eyes. She was accustomed to a quick appraisal of people and this man was merely a different type from any she had ever seen. She had read much of the typical Western man in fiction and she decided that this man did not measure up to the standard. There was something about him that she could not understand.

His eyes showed a curious red light, not in them but seemingly behind them, a light that was peculiar to himself and to his father. In far off Mexico there were men who had learned to dread those eyes. They knew that they marked Leo Crex as a man apart; as a man to whom all tenderness and mercy was as alien as they are to a gray wolf, and Walter Crex was true son to his father.

"How do I know you came in here for me?" she asked.

"I'm tellin' you," said Walter. "I can't do more'n that. I come in to get you and I got a buckboard to drive you out to the Lyin' Y. They've got a deal on and a paper needs your name to it, I believe."

"Then they will have to get the signature of Mister Kynaston, too," she said. "He owns the other half of the Lying Y."

"I know nothin' about that," said Walter. "All I know is what I tell you. If you don't want to go, that's your business. I can only go back an' tell him you wouldn't come."

She looked carefully at him. She felt instinctively that he was not to be trusted, but what was she to do? She had come two thousand miles to this place because it was the only place that she could call her own. Vaguely she wished now that she had not come.

"Very well," she said evenly. "I'll come. Get the buckboard. How far is it to the Lying Y?"

"It's quite a bit. I'll get the team. Where're your bags?"

"My two bags are here. My trunk will be kept in storage till I decide what to do with it. It can wait."

"All right. Wait here then and I'll get the buckboard."

He grudgingly carried her bags to the hotel porch and went for the buckboard that he had already engaged from the Malpais Saloon. In ten minutes he was back with the team; a pair of half-broken ponies, fighting his heavy hands as they whirled the buckboard along the street on two wheels.

"Chuck the bags in back." He made no effort to help her.

"Can't you see I've got my hands full with these darned horses?"

Without a word she flung the bags into the back seat and climbed to the front seat beside him. He drew his whip across the horses' backs and they were off down the main street with the off horse at a gallop.

All along the long street, crowded now with the refuse of the Frontier, men turned to stare at that buckboard.

"If I had a team like that, I'd be in the hills to-morror," said a burly miner, turning aside into the first convenient bar.

WALTER CREX headed his team down the long street to the narrow red trail, headed for the distant line where the Espinazos bulked in silent majesty. The refuse heaps of sordid Pintano dwindled away behind them.

Ellen Mathis's heart misgave gravely. What a terrible land this was! All hopeless red sand and dust with no sign of life except for a busy road-runner fighting a snake and a few horned toads flattened out on a rock in the heat. They had not yet come to the true ranges that lay far beyond the town.

"Is—is the farm like this?" she asked, trying to make her tone casual.

"Huh?" He glanced down at her as he wrestled with the team.

"I say is the—the farm like this land?"

"What farm you talkin' about? We ain't got no farms out here. If you been a-dreamin' that the Lyin' Y is a farm, you better get wise to yourself."

"I—I thought the Lying Y is a big farm where they raise cattle."

"It does—like hell. Cattle raise theirselves. The Lyin' Y supplies feedin' grounds an' water and grass. Where was you raised?"

"You wouldn't know if I told you," she said, angry at his incivility. "I think I have made a mistake in coming out here."

"No. You ain't made no mistake. It's a good place. You wait a bit and you'll come to like it. There ain't many women, but you'll get to like the people when you know 'em. If you ain't too busy to git around some."

"Do you work on the Lying Y?" she asked.

"Who, me? No, I don't." He laughed loudly. "I don't work for nobody 'less I choose. A man don't have to work out here if he's raisin' cattle and kin afford greaser labor like we kin. He just buys er borrows"—he laughed at that—"a few cows and turns 'em loose on the range. After a bit he's got ten where he turned only five loose. Later on he's got twenty. That's the way the Lyin' Y done? See?"

He drew the sweating ponies to a halt, headed them into the bank that edged the trail, slipped a hand behind the seat cushion and brought out a full bottle. With a deftness that bespoke long practice he drew the cork with his strong yellow teeth and held the bottle out to her.

"Better take a drink, sis," he said. "It ain't the best in the world but it'll sure keep the moths out of you. Besides that, you'n me'll be better friends after havin' a horn o' hooch passin'."

She thrust aside the proffered bottle and a little light of fear showed in her gray eyes. Caught unawares, he nearly dropped the bottle, then the horses plunged a little and it slipped from his hand and fell into the soft dust of the trail.

"Consarn you," he snarled. "You git out an' pick that up and be darned quick about it, too."

"You're either crazy or drunk," she snapped. "You—you half-drunken beast!"

"That's all right, dearie! Don't you worry none about that. Sure I been drinkin', but I ain't even halfway drunk. I ask you, would a sensible man come in to Pintano to meet a ranch owner who's a pretty heifer without takin' a few drinks? You'll git over mindin' a little thing like that. You don't like drinkin', hey? I've heard o' such people.

"I'm part full o' course, but I'll git over that. You're just a damned little fool an' you won't git over that till you're trained. I think I'll take you in hand myself. By gar, I will, just to pay you fer makin' me drop that bottle."

His strong arm went about her and she was pulled into his arms fighting against him with all her strength. But that strength was not sufficient. Slowly and irresistibly she was drawn closer and closer to him and his breath, heavy with whiskey fumes and rank tobacco, oppressed her. She wildly threw up a hand and the edge of that hand caught him squarely on the chin. Walter Crex threw up his head, wincing from the blow. The next moment a pair of iron hands gripped his neck and jerked him from his seat. He was flung to the dusty trail like an empty sack and he felt a heavy pressure on his neck. Then a voice said:

"You better let him up, hombre. You're killin' him."

He struggled to a sitting posture and found himself staring into the faces of Hard Rock Simms and the stranger who, the night before, had won from the man Sturton that roll of scrip for the Bulso de Diablo. He half rose but dropped back as Phil made a quick gesture.

"You'd better stay down till I tell you to get up," he said in a low, tense tone.

There was a snap and ring to his voice that gave Walter Crex fair warning. Crex's quick eyes took in the heavy six-gun in an open holster that was tied to his leg and he saw a heavy rifle in Hard Rock's hands. He was morally sure that very little would send these men on the prod. He sat up but made no attempt to get to his feet, and Phil turned to Ellen Mathis.

The girl caught her breath sharply. "I thank you for coming to my assistance," she said. "When I started with this man Crex from Pintano I had no idea that I was taking any risk."

"Pintano is full of men right now that it'd be unwise to trust," Phil said. "But anyone could have told you what would happen if you put any trust in a man named—Crex."

"You see, I only got to Pintano this morning," she said defensively.

"I know." He nodded. "You're Miss Ellen Mathis, aren't you? The owner of the Lying Y Ranch?"

"Yes, I am." Ellen openly looked her astonishment. "Does all the world know I was coming on that train? This man says he was sent to meet me—to take me

to the Lying Y Ranch. I own half that ranch. The other half is owned by a man named Kynaston. When this man told me he was sent to meet me, I believed him. Do you know him?"

"I know who he is. I saw him last night for the first time. Part of what he has told you is true. Just enough to falsify the whole story. I tell you this—"

"Just a minute—"

Walter Crex struggled to his feet but shrank back at sight of Hard Rock's rifle-barrel wavering in line with his ribs. "Ask that man a question, Miss Mathis. See that man with the rifle?" He pointed at Hard Rock Simms. "That man was arrested a few days ago for the cold-blooded murder of Scotty Rames, his partner. He was put in jail with this man Kitts who was bein' held as a witness to the murder. Then both of 'em broke out of jail. Ask him if that ain't so—"

She turned to Phil and looked her question, but Phil had turned to Walter Crex.

"Shut up, you fool. You'll never know how close you've been to your last breath this day."

IN a flash realization came to Phil that he could not tell this girl that he was Phil Kynaston. He had not yet got all the evidence he must have to clinch the matter of the Lying Y, and Walter Crex must not know him as Philip Kynaston. If his identity were known, his chance of getting the information he needed would be exactly nil. He must warn the girl, however.

"This man Simms, my partner, was accused by a lying thief of having killed a man," he said. "The man who accused him lied. That goes for you, Crex," he said hotly. "My advice to you, Miss Mathis, is not to go one yard farther with this man. He is simply not to be trusted. If you're wise you'll make him take you back to Pintano. We'll see you started for there."

"How far is it to the Lying Y rancho?" she asked.

"About ten miles as the crows fly—"

A sharp oath from Hard Rock stopped him in mid-speech.

"Bunch comin' up the trail," he said curtly. "Ridin' hell-for-leather, too. Looks like they're comin' from Trecientos. I'll take a look."

He scrambled to the top of the hill, gave one sharp glance at the trail and slid down the bank in a shower of loose shale.

"Girton with his posse," he said breathlessly. "Likely he's on his way back from seein' old man Leo Crex. If we stay here we'll have to fight it out with the posse and we don't want to fight the law. Back to our horses!"

A whoop and a yell and a wild rush of maddened horses along the trail told that they had been seen and recognized, and a roar of galloping hoofs swung up in the hot air. The next moment Sheriff Girton with four heavily armed men at his heels, spurred wildly up the trail. Their six-guns raised above their heads, their horses running wildly, the line of hard-riding men scattering out into the brush as they came—everything told the two men that they were on real business.

There was scant time for the two to get to their horses. A quick shot from the leading man sent a shower of sharp gravel into Phil's face. He whirled and dashed for the tangled scrub behind them. There was no time for explanations to the astounded girl as, with Hard Rock at his heels, he leaped for the place where their horses were tied.

Girton was almost at his heels as Phil ran, snatching at his gun. He did not want to exchange shots with the posse. That would at once establish him and Hard Rock as outlaws. But there was no help for it. They could not afford to be taken prisoners now. Later they could come in and surrender and clear themselves, but not while Sam Marks and both the Crexes were footloose.

His heavy gun flashed and roared and Girton's big bay horse stumbled, ploughed up rocky shale. It rolled over like a shot rabbit while Sheriff Girton slid to his feet. He dived at his horse for his gun but the gun-stock was broken by the fall. He threw it down with a curse as Newton, one of his men, rode up to him.

"My God, sheriff," he said solicitously. "You fell like a bag o' eggs. You all busted to hell an' gone?"

"Never mind me." Girton struggled to his feet. "That was Kitts an' Simms. There's a five-hundred-dollar reward fer 'em."

"You'll not collect it this trip," said Newton. "Look at 'em ride!"

He pointed to two dark dots on the distant hillside where Hard Rock and Phil

were spurring madly for cover. Girton turned on Walter Crex and shook a paper in his face.

"This is some o' yore damned work," he said. "Where you been?"

"Me? None o' your damned business," said Walter. "If you just got to know, I was in Pintano. Why?"

"Because I got a letter from your father. He told me he had this man Kitts, and Simms too, locked up over at Trecientos. I rode over to git 'em and he told me I'm a damned fool. He said he never wrote that letter. Tell me this, young feller—is yore father crazy?"

"There must be somethin' damn funny with him if he lets hisself get mixed up with you. You brung him nothin' but bad luck ever since that man Kitts locked the pair of you up and—"

Walter Crex got no further. When he reached this point in his explanation Sheriff Girton knocked him flat. Then he turned to the astonished girl.

"What's all this mean?" he asked. But before she could answer, Walter Crex spoke up:

"I don't sabe about any letter from the old man," he said. "I was in Pintano last night and I was bringin' this young lady over to the Lyin' Y when that man Kitts an' Simms jumped me. I was foolin' with the girl an' they thought I was gettin' fresh—"

Girton had no time to waste either with the girl or with her companion.

"Are you afraid to go the rest of the way with him, Miss?" he asked. "You take this young lady where she wants to go," he said sharply to Crex. "If I hear any complaints from her, you'll hear from me. Sabe?"

Walter Crex nodded glumly and climbed into the driver's seat. The next moment he started the team up the trail and Girton and his men disappeared in the brush.

CHAPTER XIII

Crex Gets a Scare

LEO CREX, standing on the porch of the Trecientos ranch house was suddenly aware of a row over at the bunkhouse. As that bunkhouse faced away from him, he could not see what was happening, and before he could shout a question a man shot around the corner of the building and broke into a run. It was Quinn, Pym's understudy at Trecientos, a burly ruffian as tough a specimen as Pym himself.

"Three o' Pym's men are back without pants," he shouted. "Pym's been killed an' Jones, too, an'—"

"What? What's that?" Crex could not believe his own ears. He stared fixedly at Quinn. "What's that you say?" he said sharply.

"Here comes Besser. Let him talk for hisself."

Besser came along half-naked. Behind him came Linton and Sykes, also half stripped, shamefaced and angry. Crex looked them over and strove for self-control. Finally the dam burst; the flood came.

"By gar," he roared. "I let Pym pick his men. He picked you all. Four men supposed to look out fer theirselves, an' now look at ye!"

"You told us to go over into the Devil's Pocket," whined Besser. "You told us to find the dead body o' Scotty Rames. By heck, we got a dead body all right. Two of 'em—but they wasn't Scotty Rames. Pym was shot an' so was Jones. That man Kitts an' his partner, Hard Rock Simms, jumped us when we wasn't lookin' fer trouble, an'—"

"Are you tellin' me that man Kitts, and Simms, was over in the Bulso de Diablo?" asked Crex. He felt a chill run down his spine. He had sent Pym to find Rames' dead body and bring it to Trecientos. He had given him another mission, too, to do away with both Kitts and Simms. And now Pym was no better than a bungler. Two of his men from Trecientos had been killed and Kitts and Simms had got away.

He snatched at Besser, jerked him inside the ranch house, and shouted to the other two men. They came reluctantly, talking in half audible asides with their chins on their shoulders and they slunk into the house like whipped curs.

They had failed and they knew by painful experience that Leo Crex never excused failure. Crex stared at them with that fierce, implacable stare so like a wolf's stare, until they felt little shivers chill them.

"Well," he hissed finally. "What you got to say? You talk, Sykes."

Sykes talked quickly, brokenly. He told fairly truthfully what had occurred.

"That damned man Kitts just played possum on us," he growled. "He fell at

the first shot from Pym and he laid there till we got up close. Then he pulled his gun on Aleck, an' Simms shot Jones. After that they had the drop on us an' took the horses and turned us loose."

He stopped talking and stood shuffling his feet aimlessly, waiting for speech while Crex's eyes focused on him till one might have expected to see fire break from the men, as from under a burning-glass. Finally it came:

"I sent you with Pym on an errand and you failed. Now you come whinin' back to me tellin' me that you couldn't find the body I sent you to git. You tell me that old man Simms and a tenderfoot named Kitts outsmarted Pym an' Jones. You're just lyin'. That's all. More'n that, I'm done with you. Not the way you think, damn you! You're not leavin' the Trecientos. Nobody does leave it. From now on you two men work with the peons. Quinn"—he turned on the astounded Quinn. "Give these men knives and set 'em to work with the peons. They'll mess and live with the peons. From now on they'll live like peons if they can't work like white men."

"We will like hell!" Besser almost leaped forward. "If you think you kin hand us a deal like that, you're crazy, Crex. We've done your dirty work ever since we've been here at Trecientos but I quit right now."

"Yeah? When you quit, let me know. I'll send word to the U. S. Marshal at Potter's Folly. He'll pay money to know where to find you. In the meantime you work with them peons. Quinn, you know what I mean."

Besser fell back babbling inarticulately, but Sykes, his face dark with wrath, reached for a heavy knife at his belt. He snatched at the sheath, but before his fingers could close a jet of sparks leaped from Crex's hip and Sykes dropped like a pole-axed ox. He fell across a reeking iron cuspidor and upset it and his blood trickled across the floor. Crex swung his heavy pistol on the other two men.

"Which is it?" he asked. "Work or this?"

"You—" Linton hurled a vitriolic name at him. "By gar, Crex, you'll swing for this!"

"All right. I'll tend to that. In the meantime, Quinn—get the irons. I'll not have these curs loose."

Quinn suddenly appeared carrying two twenty-four pound iron cannonballs to which six-foot lengths of chain were riveted that ended each in an iron cuff with a patent lock. While the two men remained covered by Crex's pistol, Quinn deftly snapped a steel cuff about an ankle of each and leaped back as Crex lowered his gun.

"There!" Crex grinned wolfishly. "Now you're settled. You'll do as you're told from now on. You'll cut lechasegulla with them peons till I say stop. I got a cure for all rebellion."

BOTH Linton and Besser knew their fate. They would stay ironed day and night! From dawn to dark they would be compelled to work like slaves under the lash. They knew that because under Crex's orders they had made others work that way and had thought it a good joke.

Rebellion showed dark on their faces and old Crex jerked from a hook his cure-all for all rebellion; a heavy black-snake whip. It sang and writhed in his hand and wrapped venomously about Linton's neck. The man sank to the floor with a little cry and put hand to his neck. That hand came away red.

"You'll do what I say," snarled Crex. "From now on every peon on Trecientos is your equal. I'll damned soon see who's boss here."

At a word Quinn herded his prisoners into the open. They moved like automatons. Fearing the lash, they picked up the heavy balls in both hands and stumbled across the yard to the low adobe houses where the peons were quartered. Before they had gone twenty yards Crex halted Quinn with a shout.

"Take those two men over to the old ranch house first thing in the mornin' and get the place fixed up. I want it put in order. I'll have some visitors there come the night. Sabe?"

Assured that Quinn understood his orders the old buccaneer went to his sordid office and gave himself up to an evening of solitary drinking.

Dark glances from the men at the bunkhouse followed him. As long as Leo Crex confined his brutality to the helpless Mexican peons on Trecientos, whom he had reduced to slavery, the white desperadoes did not care; but this matter touched them all.

Every one of those white wolves who

snarled daily at their master knew now that at any moment he might join Linton and Besser. While the bunkhouse boiled, Leo Crex tried to mature his plans.

Walter was due to arrive the next day with the girl, Ellen Mathis. How should he handle her?

He was vaguely sorry now that he had agreed to make Sam Marks his partner in that matter of the glory hole, and he sat for an hour trying to figure some way to double-cross him.

Then the sharp patter of hoofbeats brought his head up and he leaped to his feet and threw back his chair as the door flung open and Sam Marks strode into the room.

His face was dark with temper and his hands worked like claws as he snatched off his hat, threw it to the floor and took the bottle from Crex's hands.

"I came over to settle matters about them cattle before I start that survey with Davis," he said. "I told that man you sent to me to tell you that me and Davis will start the survey on the twentieth or twenty-first."

"The men I sent," said Crex stupidly. "I didn't send any men."

"Sure you did," said Marks. "That new man, I mean. I never seen him before. I didn't ketch his name but he was ridin' Aleck Pym's cayuse, the big bay with a fiddle head an' one ear split. . . ."

"Hell, man. I didn't send no such man!" Crex sprang from his chair and swung in fury on Marks. "Those fools told me the truth," he said. "If a man was ridin' Pym's horse, then Pym's dead. What did this man look like?"

"A tall, light-haired, youngish-lookin' feller. I mind now he had 'P.K.' on his saddle, in big silver letters. He knew all about Dyer, too. I don't believe Dyer done any talkin'. It'd land him in jail if he did, but this man knows all about the cattle and I don't know what else. Who is he? If you didn't send him, who is he?"

"You tell me," said Crex viciously. "By gar, I'd think you're too old an' too ugly to be runnin' around the ranges tellin' your business, an' mine too, to every splay-footed wanderer. You've spilled the beans it looks like . . ."

Even Sam Marks, who knew Leo Crex better than anyone else, did not dare tell him just how much he had told that stranger. He remembered now that he had told him all about the girl. He had told that man about all that he knew, and the stranger seemed to know it all beforehand.

"Oh well," he said optimistically. "It'll all come out all right. It can't fail. When me an' Davis finish that re-survey, that'll put your mine at the Bulso de Diablo inside the lines of Trecientos. Then you'll have no more trouble. Davis'll swear to the accuracy of his work an'—"

"Oh, for cripes sake shut up!" said Crex wrathfully. "You're only strainin' your bellows. I sent Aleck Pym out with four men. He took Jones, Linton, Besser an' Sykes. Besser an' Linton an' Sykes just got back. They went over to the Bulso de Diablo to git the dead body of old Scotty Rames—"

"What the devil did you want with that?" demanded Marks in goggle-eyed astonishment.

"Sheriff Girton is lookin' fer Hard Rock Simms and his partner Kitts for havin' murdered Rames. He needs the dead body to prove the murder. If he can't find the dead body, Girton can't hold Simms. If Simms is loose he kin show everybody all about the gold at the Bulso de Diablo."

"Well, go on." Marks' tone showed he was convinced.

"Besser with Linton an' Sykes came back here afoot an' half-naked. They told me that man Hard Rock and Kitts jumped 'em over at the Bulso de Diablo, killed Jones an' Pym and held the others up.

"They stripped 'em of their pants and guns and horses and turned 'em loose to come back here afoot. Then that devil Kitts takes Pym's horse and fools you on the range. That means that Simms and Kitts have got away with Rames' dead body, and without that we can't prove the murder."

"Good Lord, what difference does that make?" demanded Marks. "By the time Simms gets a chance to talk we'll have the cattle across the pass an' the survey made. You can hold the Devil's Pocket with guns after that. How about the girl?"

"I told Walter to bring her to the old ranch house," said Crex. "She mustn't ever be able to identify this place. I'm goin' over there now an' wait fer 'em. Better come along."

"Not me. I'll git back," said Marks. "Lend me a fresh horse. I got to get Davis started."

Crex ordered a horse saddled and when Marks had gone, sat down to a careful consideration of his plans.

ALMOST before sun-up he got to horse and started across the hills for the old ranch house. It stood about seven miles from the house he had built and was so tucked away in a tiny basin in the hills that anyone not knowing of its existence would never have suspected it.

Leo Crex laid fires in two rooms and summoned a fat Mexican woman who lived in a small adobe *jacale* behind the house.

"You hang around here, Josefa, till I need you," he said. "See to it that the little smoke-house has a good lock on it and a cot and chair in it too."

He grinned his satisfaction as the woman waddled away.

"When that girl gits here," he muttered, "I reckon she'll come mighty near to doin' what she's told before she gits away. Best to keep her till we have all the cattle tended to. After that, Marks kin send one of his Lyin' Y men to take her back to Pintano. After bein' kept here a day er two with Walter on the job it ain't likely she'll boast about it er want it made public."

He spent the afternoon pottering about the place and it was nearly sundown when a cloud of red dust rising fast along the trail drew him to the porch.

"That'll sure be Walter with the girl," he muttered.

The dust cloud soon turned in at the end of the little valley and swung toward the house. Crex walked over to a great sycamore tree to wait.

The buckboard rocked up the trail and Walter jerked the team to a halt before the house. Leo Crex strode forward as a girl climbed stiffly out of the buckboard and came toward him.

"You must be Mister Marks," she said. "I am Miss Mathis and I am very glad to get at last to the Lying Y Ranch."

She held out a hand that Crex did not know what to do with. He glanced surreptitiously at her and wondered if she would be as docile as she must be to have his plans succeed.

"I'm not Sam Marks," he said. "Come inside the house . . . ."

He was suddenly aware of Walter noiselessly framing words with his lips from his position behind the girl.

"Just a minute, Miss Mathis," he said. "I got some orders to give this man. You go on in the house. I'll be with you in a minute."

He led her across the porch and flung the door open. Then he stood aside as she entered.

"I'll join you in a minute," she heard him say as he turned away. Then his footsteps pounded across the porch and from the vastness of the big sitting room she heard his booming tones from the porch as he tried in vain to lower his voice.

"Well, what the hell ails you?" he demanded curtly. "You don't act like you got good sense, standin' there like a image makin' faces wi' your mouth. If you got a word to say, say it before I knock it outen you."

Curtly and incisively, she heard the younger man reply, but the full meaning of the words was lost to her.

"That man Sturton you been huntin' fer years turned up last night at the Malpais. Girton with his man was out trailin' Hard Rock an' his partner Kitts. . . . Then that damned man Kitts turned up.

"He was sittin' in the poker game when I got there. Him and Sturton had been playin' and Sturton had lost a lot to him. Then Sturton chucked into the pot all his scrip for that tract o' land that contains the Bulso de Diablo, an'—"

"An' what? Go on! Talk, man! Or shall I cut your damned tongue out to git the facts?"

Crex's voice cracked like the whip that he had used so mercilessly the day before on his prisoners.

"Kitts won the pot," said Walter Crex sullenly. "Then Botts came in an' tried to arrest him, but he got away. Today as we were drivin' up through the pass, him and that same damned crook, Hard Rock Simms, dropped on us an' held us up."

"Again? Good heaven! Am I the father of a half-baked idiot? (He forgot that every time he himself had clashed with that man Kitts he had emerged second best.) "What'd he want?"

"I didn't get a chance to find out. While we were arguin', old Sheriff Girton turned up with his posse. Hard Rock Simms and that man Kitts got clean away."

Leo Crex studied him with unseeing eyes. Presently he spoke.

"I'm just beginnin' to see. Girton came over here. He told me he had a letter from me and he showed it to me. It didn't look a bit like my hand o' writin'. It told Girton that I had Hard Rock Simms and Kitts in the storeroom over here and that I wanted five hundred dollars for 'em. I see it now. They wrote that letter and sent it to Girton to git him out o' Pintano, and the damned fool fell fer it!

Then he burst suddenly into one of those fits of rage for which he was notorious.

"I sent Pym an' four men over to the Bulso de Diablo fer the dead body o' Rames. Kitts and Simms ambushed 'em. They killed Pym an' Jones an' sent the others home minus guns, horses or pants. Besser an' Sykes tried to jump me with Linton, an' I had to kill Sykes. Now you tell me this man Kitts won the scrip fer that land from this man Sturton—"

"Yes and that ain't all by a hell of a sight," said Walter Crex. "You didn't git all that ore offen Abe Gray. He kept back enough of it to make an assay.

"He found gold in it and he sent out word that gold was found in the Espinazos and there's a gold rush on in the damned place. As I left town, water was a dollar a bucket and potatoes was six fer a dollar."

"What the hell do I care? I ain't buyin' no potatoes. I want that scrip to the Bulso de Diablo."

"You needn't sweat none over that," said Walter roughly. "When Lynn Davis makes his survey and shows that land belongs, and always has rightfully belonged, inside the lines o' Trecientos, that scrip won't be worth a tinker's damn. The man on a claim owns it. That's why you'd better have the best men you know right in your glory hole when that survey's made."

"That's a good point." His father nodded. "This damned story o' yours has put me clean offen my feed. What I'm worried about is this girl here. Bringin' her over here sort o' changes the cards."

"Yeah. I see that. What'll you do with her?"

"*Sh!* You fool! She may hear you. Your voice carries like a rifle shot. I'll keep her here, o' course, till Marks gits the cattle across the pass. By that time Marks an' Davis will have made the survey. In any case, if Davis does his work right we'll own that land."

"Suppose he fails? Then that scrip gives the title to that man Kitts who's holdin' it. Don't forget that fact."

"I won't. I'll not fergit, either, that Kitts killed Pym and Jones—and that he done a lot of other things that I owe him a lot fer. I'm goin' after Mister Kitts and that man Simms myself, and, by gar, I'll git 'em!"

"Still you ain't told me what you aim to do with the girl. If she gits loose knowin' what she'll be bound to know, it'll sure put us behind the bars. It's all well enough fer you to say it ain't kidnapin' but it comes so darned close to it that it skeers me to think of. Trecientos is a good hidin' place fer state and county officers, but I ain't covetin' no run-in with federal people."

"You're mightily concerned about that girl," said Crex sneeringly. "Why?"

"Because my hide's in danger and your'n ain't," said Walter. "It was me brung her here. If it ever comes to a court case it'll be me she'll identify. Ten years, that is, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"There's one sure way to shut her fool mouth," said Walter Crex. "A wife can't testify against her husband."

"You mean," said his father wonderingly, "that you're willin' to marry this here girl that you never seen before?"

"You wait till you get a good look at her. I mean that I'm willin' to marry her since she owns half the Lyin' Y. That ranch kin come back."

"She'll not marry you," said his father grimly. "But we may as well put it to her."

"I know damned well," said Walter hotly, "that I'm not goin' to jail fer ten years. If we keep her here two er three days it's in my mind that she'll do most anything to have anybody marry her on account of what folks will think."

"All right," said Leo Crex. "Let's have her in and talk to her."

CHAPTER XIV

"We'll Get a Sky-Pilot"

ELLEN MATHIS rose to her feet as Leo Crex entered the room with Walter at his heels. She came into the house with her head up and angry. Her eyes were starry with rage and her face was flushed.

"I want to see Mister Marks," she said curtly. "Where is he?"

That was a question that Leo Crex was not at the moment prepared to answer.

"Where is Mister Marks?" she asked again.

"Seein' to the Lyin' Y cattle, if he's on the job he's paid fer," said Leo Crex briefly. "That is, he's a-lookin' fer cattle that used to b'long to the Lyin' Y—if he kin find 'em."

"Then send and get him. I tell you, I want to see Mister Marks."

"You'll see him in due an' proper time," he said coolly. "We got some things to talk over first."

"Why isn't he here? He knew I was coming and he isn't here. This is the Lying Y Ranch, isn't it?"

"*You* say it is." Crex's upper lip lifted slightly; a bad sign if she had but known it. "You listen to me, young woman. You say you're named Ellen Mathis an' that you own a half interest in the Lyin' Y Ranch. Kin you prove what you say?"

Her eyes dilated at his change of tone and the very air seemed charged with antagonism. Her experiences during that drive, the sheer brutality of Walter Crex, the hold-up on the trail; Girton's arrival and the fight and flight of Kitts and Hard Rock Simms all came back to her suddenly.

The sudden change from her well ordered life back East was so great that she had not yet had time to orient herself, but she felt that something was happening that she could not understand. What did this all mean?

"Kin you prove it?" demanded Crex again.

"Prove what? That I am Ellen Mathis? Of course I can."

She flung some papers on the table and while he took and read them slowly and carefully, she studied him. She could not know that he was trying to gain time to collect his thoughts. The news that Walter had given him of Sturton's appearance had changed things absolutely. He had to make new plans.

Leo Crex was a man who had never balked at taking big chances. He knew now that his best chance of holding that tract of land lay in the new survey that Davis was to make. Once it was established on indisputable authority that that mine lay within the original limits of Trecientos, even that scrip would be worthless in law. In the meantime there was a certainty by which he could cash in for a large sum. Even those unfattened cattle were worth thirty dollars a head and Sam Marks said he could ship five thousand across the pass.

Fifty per cent of that was well worth having especially as no risk was incurred in getting it. He had done the same thing so often that it seemed just a part of the ordinary day's work to him.

THESE and some other thoughts raced through his brain as he ran his eye over the papers that Ellen had handed him.

"These seem all right." He handed her the papers. "I see they mention the man Kynaston who owns the other half of the ranch. Where is he?"

"I never heard of him till I saw that will," said Ellen.

"Huh. If you don't mind tellin' me, how'd you come to make up your mind to come to the Lyin' Y? Seems a funny proceedin' fer a young girl—an' her unmarried or—are you married? Are you Miss er Missis?"

"I'm 'Miss.'" She laughed for the first time. "I had a little money and a good job. Then I lost the job and the money, too. That's why I had to come out here."

"I see. Any port in a storm. Who told you to come out here?"

"No one knew I came," she said. "One man, my lawyer, told me in his opinion I'd better send a good man out, but I decided to come myself."

"You done just right," said Crex. "A person kin look out best for his own interests. Now listen to me, Miss Mathis—"

"Wait just a minute," she said quickly. "Are you Mister Marks?"

"Who me? No. My name's Crex. Your ranch, the Lyin' Y, is busted flat's a pancake, Miss Mathis, unless we do some-

thin' to stop it. You ain't got a head o' stock as far as I know."

"Then where is Mister Marks going to get five thousand head?" she demanded shrewdly. Too shrewdly for her own good if she had but known it.

Those words told Leo Crex that she had overheard a part at least of his talk with Walter. This girl knew entirely too much.

Till this moment he had felt that when she had served his purpose, which was when Marks' five thousand head of cattle had been checked into the Trecientos corral, she could be sent back to Pintano and left to Fate. Now he knew better. He sat staring moodily at her and she spoke again.

"Is this the Lying Y Ranch? I ask you again. Answer me that." Her voice rose, quivered, and broke on a high note. Suspicion that she could not account for sprang into life. Who was this man Crex? By what right had he injected himself into her affairs? If she was at the Lying Y Ranch that she owned, all well and good; then where was Mister Marks? If she was not at the Lying Y Ranch, where was she?

"I ask you again, is this the Lying Y Ranch?"

"Never mind about that. You asked the man who druv you here to bring you to the Lyin' Y, an' here you are. An' here you stay till we make a deal. Don't you make no mistake about it, young woman. I've handled heifers like you before an' they was all corral broke when I got done with 'em."

That was true. If Leo Crex had chosen he could have told the frightened girl of camp followers to the Mexican forces far to the south; women he had known in other years. But now Crex said nothing.

He sat and glowered at her exactly as a great spider sits and watches some brightly colored fly that has entangled itself inextricably in his web.

He had made up his mind to a desperate play. No argument that he could advance would ever convince any cattle man in Amargo Valley of his innocence in the matter of those five thousand head once they had been driven across the pass. If he said he bought them, he would be required to prove it. Too, he dared not trust Sam Marks.

If he argued that he had bought Bar Chevron cows and that these belonged to Sam Marks, then Marks would be required to show that he owned five thousand head and prove ownership. Before any man who knew the a b c of stock raising, he and Marks would stand convicted of exactly what they had done.

This girl was a fool. That was evident. No one but a fool would have come as she had, right into the very place where she ought not to be. She was undoubtedly half owner of the Lyin' Y. She was in his hands.

Walter wanted her just as he had wanted other women. But in this case marriage was a safeguard that he dared not ignore.

"You butted into my affairs to please yourself," he snarled. "You'll leave here when it pleases me."

"Who are you?" She struggled for calmness and self-control. "Who was that scoundrel who brought me here? What does this mean? Why was I brought here?"

"Well, young woman, I'll do my best to answer all you ask. You was brung here 'cause you said you wanted to come to the Lyin' Y. You're stayin' here 'cause a man says he wants to marry you. That suit you?"

"Suit me? You're crazy. I'll—"

Her voice rose in a scream that rang along the halls and echoed through the empty rooms and made Walter Crex, outside the room, grin a little.

"Sounds like the old man's tryin' to git his hand in," he muttered. "Hell," he ejaculated, throwing aside a half-smoked cigarette; "a man ought to halter break his own woman."

He started for the house, paused a moment in doubt, then flung forward through the door and burst into the room. Ellen, hoping for aid, gave one fleeting glance; then she jumped behind the table as Leo Crex slammed the door shut and set his back against it.

"What's the matter?" asked Walter. "Seems to me I heard a voice."

"She was a-callin' a policeman offen the street-corner," said his father ironically. "He's prob'ly a-sleepin' on the fireplug." Then he turned on Walter and his voice changed.

"She heard damned near all we was talkin' about," he said savagely. "And because of what she heard she stays right here . . . . You git into that back room

an' stay there and keep your mouth shut," he shouted.

And before the startled girl was aware of his intention, he seized her by an arm, whirled her inside a small storeroom that gave on the main room, closed and hasped the door and turned wrathfully on his son.

"You may not know it, but we're in one hell of a mess," he said. "I'm sorry now we ever brought that hussy here. We can't keep her here forever and we daren't let her go. If she gits away from here an' makes a charge against us, it'll raise hell-a-mile!"

"I told you that before, but you knew better," snarled Walter.

"I missed the main point," said his father grimly. "I was so keen on them cattle and on that Bulso de Diablo matter that I overlooked a big bet. I was thinkin' that her complaints to Girton or to the people in Pintano would be took up by Girton. I knowed I could handle Girton. I kin handle the local people too. But, hell, boy, if that girl gits away and makes a complaint that she was brung over here and kept here against her will, it becomes a kidnapin' charge! That makes it a federal matter."

"It's like you say. We can't turn her loose," said Walter.

"An' we can't keep her either. O' course . . . ." He paused and chewed his beard.

"Better not even think of that Yznaga woman," said Walter accusingly.

He shrank back at the sheeted flame in his father's eyes. The man's face gleamed with a fierce rage that burned and glowed like a lambent flame that seemed to light the caverns of his eyes.

"If—if you ever mention that name again, I'll kill you, by gar!" His voice broke with its fierce insistence as he stepped forward and dropped hand to his gun.

Walter Crex leaped for safety, slammed open the door and jerked his rifle to his hip and cocked it.

"You try that just once," he said brokenly. "You've laid hands on me fer the last time. You try on me what you've done to Besser and Jukes and Whynn.

"Oh I know it all. I know how Whynn died. Try that on me, an' I'll kill you if you *are* my father. I know too much."

"You damned fool . . . ." But Leo Crex's hand dropped to his side. "You're right you know too much, an', if you ain't keerful, what you know will sock you behind the bars. Put that rifle down. We got to talk this over quiet an' plan somethin' that won't slip."

"Huh! My plan's the only one that'll hold water." Walter lowered his rifle but kept a finger on the trigger. "If she marries me that'll shut her fool mouth."

"That's so. But suppose she won't marry you? What then?"

"Lock her up in this house an' give me the key," said Walter hoarsely. "Leave old Josefa to do the cookin'. When you see that girl again she'll be more'n willin' to marry me, or anybody who asks her."

LEO CREX studied his son as one might study some rare specimen of lower life. He had himself taken women when and where he wanted them but among them all there had been one woman in his evil life, who for her little day had made him as nearly decent as was humanly possible. To this day he did not like to think of that woman and he could not understand this son he had begotten.

He could have understood vicious strength. Had he begotten brains without strength he would have known how to deal with that. Ruthlessly as was his wont. But this combination of weak viciousness, this unwillingness to risk much to gain all was beyond him. He looked his son over from head to foot and snorted his disgust.

"By gar, it'll be worse fer her if she does marry you," he growled. "Even then—How'll we manage it now? We'll have to git a sky-pilot er a J. P., an' neither will come to Trecientos."

"You wait. After she's kep' house with me here fer a few days she'll be hollerin' fer a sky-pilot," said Walter. "Then we'll be safe. The half-owner of the Lyin' Y can't say a word because it'll implicate her husband. No trouble about that. And we kin get old Minn, justice of the peace, over on Persimmon Crick. He's as afraid of you as he is of the devil."

That was true of most men within a two-hundred-mile radius of Trecientos, and Leo grinned his appreciation.

"It'll come to that," he said. "She's got to be muzzled. I'll bring her back and tell her."

"Better leave her alone a bit," said Walter with a crude sense of psychology. "You starve wild ponies to gentle 'em. Do the same with women."

"How in hell'd you learn that?" demanded his father. Then he went to the door, flung it open and shouted, "Josefa!"

"Señor . . . ." A slatternly Mexican woman as broad and thick as she was tall, slid into the room.

"There's an American señorita locked in the storeroom. At supper time and breakfast time see that she is fed. See that all is done well and that nothing happens to her. You can answer any questions that she asks. If she gets away I hold you responsible. *Sabe usted?*"

"*Si señor.*" Josefa cringed openly. "If she asks questions what shall I answer?"

"Tell her the truth as well as you can. You can talk English when you choose. Tell her what will happen if she fails to carry out my plans. She will marry Don Gualterio here tomorrow or next day. Make her understand what happens if she tries to refuse. Don Gualterio will remain here tonight and will have the key to her room when you are not with her. Now—bring the girl in here to me."

Josefa unhasped the lock of the storeroom door and Ellen stood back of the doorway. Her face was flushed with anger and her eyes, dazzled by the light, were sparkling.

Without a word she walked deliberately across the room to where Leo Crex stood. His eyes fixed upon her but he gave no sign till she suddenly seized the half-full whiskey bottle from the table and hurled it straight at his face with all her strength.

His upflung hand met the thrown bottle in midair and dashed it aside. It broke into a score of tinkling fragments on the wall. The next moment his open palm swung like a flail, caught her on the side of the head and sent her staggering against the table. Leo Crex was not a gentle hombre in his dealings with his women.

"You li'l' hell-cat," he said, and there was unwilling admiration in his voice. She was the first person who for years had dared raise hand to him. "Maybe that'll learn you," he said. "Set down—" And he thrust her bodily into a chair. "Now, you listen to me. It's like I told you. You're goin' to be married to this man here. He's my son an' he's willin' to marry you. You're plumb lucky in that if you only knowed it."

"I demand that you take or send me at once back to Pintano," she said sharply. "You got me here under false pretences. That man" — she pointed at Walter — "whom you say is your son, asked me if I wanted to go to the Lying Y Ranch, and when I said 'yes,' he said he'd drive me over. Then he brought me here and — and this is not the Lying Y and—and you're not Mister Marks. I—I demand that you take me back to Pintano."

"That's right." He nodded approvingly. "You go right on demandin'. When you're married to Walter here you'll quit that demandin'. You'll come to heel like a well broke dog. You're plumb lucky he means to marry you."

His calm insistence on that marriage, as though it were certain, frightened her.

A LONG silence fell, broken only by the futile buzzing of a fat bluebottle fly heading against a dusty window pane.

"Well—" Crex picked up his hat. "I'll be leavin' you now. You remember what I tell you. You're to be married tomorrer. You better be studyin' on that a bit. You can't git out of it unless you're goin' to be satisfied with worse. This boy o' mine will take care o' you tonight—an' a few other nights till you come to my way o' thinkin'."

The utter devilish malignity of his words and in his careless demeanor frightened her as nothing else could have. She staggered slightly and would have fallen but for the table that she clutched frantically. Then the world seemed to go out in blackness before her.

She was never quite sure how long she lay across the table. When consciousness returned she was lying on a cot roughly laced with rawhide in a whitewashed room which was bare except for the cot, a rough table on which a candle in a bottle guttered in the wind and a chair made from a barrel in which sat a shapeless Mexican woman. The moment the girl's eyes opened the woman rose and came to her.

"I am Josefa," she said in strongly accented English. "W'at you want, I get."

"Where—where am I? What does all this mean?" Ellen sat up and realized that she was cold. Also her head ached where Crex had struck her. She raised a hand to her bruised face and took it quickly away. "Who are you?"

"You? I? Josefa .... *Un criada* .... A servant. Señor Crex, 'e say—"

"*Who* is Mister Crex? Why am I here? Tell me that."

"For no good, Señorita. Leesten—They tell me I can talk."

"They tell you you can talk? What ails you? Are you a slave?"

"Slave? *Esclava?* Señorita zat ees w'at we all are at Trecientos. Look!"

Her nervous hand tore away her dress, and Josefa disclosed on her brown shoulder the perfect mark of a small horseshoe. A mule shoe, if Ellen Mathis had known it, burned into the flesh.

"Zat ees put there years ago. W'en I firs' come to Trecientos I refuse to work for Señor Crex. He tell me to do oder theengs—not work. I refuse an' he have me flog. That do no good. Zen 'e brand me, Señorita. I tell you, zat man all devil."

"But, what can he want of me? Why was I kidnaped like this?"

"Keednaped? No sabe. I no understand."

"Yes. Carried off."

"I understand now. I tell you. Zey know you own ze big rancho ze Lyin' Y. Eet is zat wat I tell you. I tell you zees moch. Zey meet you at Pintano an' zey carry you off because Señor Marks and Señor Crex want all ze cattle from ze Lying Y rancho. Zen zey fin' zey do beeg fool thing. They fear you tell.

"Zey dare not let you go back. In zees state zey do dis—" And Josefa drew a fat and dirty finger about her wrinkled neck in a way that could not be misunderstood. "When you talk they hang zese men. Zat ees w'y you marry zees man. So you no can talk."

"I? My heavens! Do they think I'm a fool? I tell you what I told them. I'll die before I'll marry that scoundrel."

"More better you do," said Josefa heavily. "Oder women say same. More better you do w'at old man say do. I know."

She waddled to the table, blew out the guttering candle and went out, slamming the door and the overcome girl heard the heavy bolt slip into place.

CHAPTER XV

The Rescuers' Ride

WITH Hard Rock and Pedro at his heels, Phil fled across three ranges before he drew rein. He had hoped to avoid this open clash with the law. From this time on they would be outlaws, a legitimate target for the rifle of any man who coveted the offered reward for their arrest "dead or alive." That shot that killed Girton's horse had insured it.

"Stop here a minute." Phil pulled his blown horse to a halt in an aspen clump and waited for the others.

"We'd better pull our freight before they see us," growled Hard Rock. "We got no time to waste."

"I'm not wastin' time," said Phil sharply. "Do you know who that girl was? She's Miss Mathis and she's half-owner of the Lyin' Y. I own the other half."

"All I got to say is she's in damned bad company," said Hard Rock stubbornly.

"Hold on, old-timer! From what I learned from Marks on the range yesterday, that girl has not the faintest idea where she's going. The man driving her is Walter Crex, son of old Leo. He's takin' her over to Trecientos Ranch but lettin' her believe she's goin' to the Lying Y. .... What is it, Pedro?" he asked of the Mexican who was clamoring for recognition.

"Señor," quoth Pedro, "if a pretty woman goes to the Trecientos Ranch she will only regret it once, but that will be forever. You should have warned her when you saw her."

"How could I?" demanded Phil hotly. "If I had told I am not Paul Kitts but Phil Kynaston, the part owner of the Lying Y, Walter Crex would have heard me. That would have forever ruined my chance to find out about the stolen cattle from the Lyin' Y."

"Well," commented Hard Rock, "she's plumb out o' luck fallin' into the hands o' that Crex bunch. That's all I've got to say."

"You're dead right there. That'll be all to be *said*. The time had come for *doin'*, not talkin'!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Hard Rock.

"I mean this. You saw Miss Mathis.

You can tell what she is. A pretty girl from away back East. She knows nothing of Amargo Valley or of men like Crex. She trusted Walter Crex and he let her believe he's takin' her to her own ranch. You know what the Crexes are. You and I and Pedro are going to trail the buckboard and get the girl away from the Crexes."

Hard Rock stared at him and his jaw dropped. "You mean that the three of us are goin' to try to do what no one has ever yet been able to do?" he asked. "To make old Leo Crex give up what he's once got in his grip? Ain't you got good sense? Old Crex has got a bunch o' killers over at Trecientos. He's got about twenty men."

"Huh! We put Pym and Jones out o' business," said Phil. "Old man Crex be damned! Every time he's run up against us he's been sorry. We know now what he and Marks plan to do and I've got the scrip that gives me title to the mine he's been robbin' for years. He's nothin' but a four-flusher. An ore and cattle thief. Think I'll let that girl stay in his hands?"

"I don't see how you'll git her away," said Hard Rock.

"Come on. I'll show you." Phil set his saddle and cinched it, looked to his rifle and led his horse up the crest of the low divide. Pedro glanced at him for a second, then clutched him by a foot.

"Señor," he almost babbled, "you do not know what you plan. Crex has many men at Trecientos, any one of whom will kill you on sight. What Crex takes, he holds."

"No, he doesn't. He lets go when his hand is forced and I'm going to force it now. Come on. Are you afraid?"

The little Mexican drew himself up. "Of course I am afraid, señor," he said. "But that is no reason for me to remain behind. I only wished to caution you. How shall we do this? We can follow the tracks of the buckboard when we have found them."

"Wait a bit." Phil turned to the old prospector. "Hard Rock, didn't you say there is but the one pass across the Espinazos?"

"Yep. That's right. We kin easy follow that buckboard. They've got to go through the pass."

"That's exactly why we won't go there. They'll be lookin' for us there if anywhere. When they get to Trecientos, Walter Crex may remember us and may send men to watch the pass. Where else can we cross the range?"

"I'll be damned if I know," said Hard Rock frankly. "I've always heard them hills are impassable."

"Shucks man! No hills are impassable. We've got to cross the Espinazos at some place other than the pass . . . . What is it, Pedro?" he asked again of the old man.

"I have been at this Trecientos rancho many years ago, señor. I know there is a pass."

"Take the lead," said Phil briefly. "We lose time."

THE pass was miles away and he knew that Walter Crex would lose no time. Also Girton and his men would endeavor to find them and that would mean a fight. He did not want a fight with Girton, for he did not propose to give the sheriff more of an excuse than he now had to make trouble.

From now on his own life and that of Hard Rock lay in the crook of any man's trigger-finger. He edged his horse over the crest and with Hard Rock behind him dropped into trace behind Pedro's pony.

They learned that day why the range was called "Espinazo." It was a veritable backbone of the world. Canyon after canyon that led nowhere took them into the heart of the hills. In an hour's travel they crossed a single dry water-course seventeen times. That creek-bed was rank with tangled growth and from the sheer sides dwarfed gnarled trees thrust out warning limbs from a crest that let in the meager daylight as a crack lets in the sun.

Up and down they went, now clawing at the rock-face, again hanging to their horses' tails as the winded beasts toiled up the shaly slopes. Sweat dripped from them and ran in rivulets down their backs. They quivered from sheer exhaustion like scared horses as at last Pedro shuffled to a halt on the last divide and dropped beneath the nose of his exhausted horse.

"Now, señor," he panted, "we are done. From here it is all downhill."

That proved false encouragement. They were yet to find that to tramp downhill holding back a too-eager horse is more tiring than uphill work. It was almost sunset when they came out on the

low flat land and saw the dark jaws of the pass rearing high above and behind them. They had crossed the Espinazo range.

"There . . . ." Hard Rock shook a horny fist at the blue hills. "That's done, thank heaven."

"Yeah, and that's only the beginnin'." Phil rose and took his horse. "We've got to work while light lasts. We've got to cut trail now and find the heel marks of the buckboard after they left the pass. They may not take the girl to Trecientos. They may hide her in the hills. We've got to pick up the wheel tracks."

"Cutting trail" simply means that one goes a distance beyond where a trail was last seen and describes a giant circumference till the trail is found anew. It saves much time and distance.

"We kin only count on about two hours of daylight," said Hard Rock as they moved swiftly across the low-lying level above which the pass showed like a small cut in a very large cake.

"What ails Pedro?" he asked sharply. "What's he think he's got?"

For the little Mexican leaped to his feet and snapped his fingers as one does at sight of game.

"I believe he's got it!"

"Wheel marks, señor. See . . . ." And Pedro pointed to twin furrows across the soft top of a gopher mound. "Look there." And he pointed to the hoofprints of a galloping horse.

"That's so." Phil bent over the marks and gave a little exclamation of pleasure. "Here's a glove, too, that only Miss Mathis can have dropped," and he picked up a suede glove that had been jarred from Ellen's lap by a sudden leap of the team. "This settles it. They've gone this way."

"One moment, señor." Pedro rose to his full height. "I was here years ago and I know the country. This track does not lead to the Trecientos rancho where Crex lives. This track leads toward the *old* house that was built nearly a hundred years ago. Leo Crex lives in a stone house that he himself built.

"It lies over there." And he pointed to the southwest where the evening star hung like a lamp in the dark sky.

"The old house lies off this way perhaps seven miles." He now pointed off to the northwest. I think I understand now. This man Crex has sent the girl to the old house so that she can never identify Crex's residence as the place to which she was taken. This way, señor. I am sure I am right."

He gathered up his reins and moved off in the dusk and the two fell in behind him.

"It's God's good blessin'," muttered Hard Rock, "that we struck this place while it was light enough to see them tracks."

"A good deal more than that," said Phil grimly. "Has it struck you that if it hadn't been for Pedro we'd have made straight for Crex's house? When we located it, we would have run into his bunch of gunmen. We're sure playin' in luck. Come on."

THAT luck held. They kept to the low-lying fringes of the red-willow copses and the lines of yellowing aspens that fringed the dry water-courses and passed like shadows in the growing dark along the mesa edges that were walled in by the blackness of the hills. Finally Pedro stopped so suddenly that his horse seemed to move backward.

"Yonder is a light in the house," he said in a low tone. "And I think I hear a horse."

A loud and sudden thumping as of a horse kicking heavy planks broke the hush, then a light pricked out against the night.

"*La casa* . . . . the house . . . . señores," breathed Pedro. He got no further for Phil's hand on his arm squeezed like a vise. Against that dimly lighted window a man's shape was outlined; then another shadow took shape. A woman stood inside the house, outlined against the dim glow.

"Hard Rock," Phil whispered sharply, "you hold the horses. Be sure they don't whinny. I'll need Pedro here. He knows the place."

Hard Rock grunted. He saw the sense of that so he gathered the reins and squatted under the horses' noses while Phil with Pedro catfooted forward through the gloom.

The house bulked big under a ceiling of huge live-oaks and the faint glow drew his attention. Against that glow he could see Ellen Mathis.

She stood exactly as he had first seen her on the trail below the pass. Her head was held high and the wide-open eyes

held a look of utter scorn; a look that Phil thought was enough to damn the man who caused it. The very posture of her head spoke defiance. The next moment he heard a voice, indubitably the voice of Walter Crex that he knew now. He had heard it twice; once in the Malpais Saloon, again on the trail below the pass.

"No manner o' sense, you bein' a fool," said Crex sharply. "You was brung here because we need you. You'd be kept here because I choose. It's just like you've been told. You're goin' to spend the night here. You kin marry me or not just as you choose. You'll tell me in the mornin', I reckon."

"You fool!" Her words cut like a whiplash even through Walter Crex's hide. "I'll die rather than marry you."

"You ain't got the choice, dearie. Not till mornin'. I reckon by that time you'll do what you're told to do, and, by gar, I'll do the tellin'! I reckon I'll take a kiss right now. You owe me that."

Pedro was suddenly thrust aside and in two steps Phil was at the closed door. Like the doors of many old houses in the Southwest it had been made in two parts so that the upper part could be kept open for coolness while the lower part was closed against snakes and toads. The upper half was open.

Phil did not wait to find latch or bolt. He placed one hand on that lower door and vaulted as he did into saddle every day. The next moment there was a crash and the house shook. The candle dropped into its own grease and went out, plunging the room in Stygian darkness in which two crazed men fought for breath and life.

Years seemed to pass in the mind of the frightened girl. Then the table threshed aside, a chair was hurled across the room; a heavy thud was followed by a deep groan; then a panting curse was followed by a heavy fall and—silence!

"Quick, Pedro," a voice pulsed out of the dark. "A light, Pedro. Pronto, hombre!"

Ellen knew she had heard the voice before, but she could not identify it. Then a tiny point of light flickered and Pedro's trembling hands cupped a match. The next second the flame caught, the candle flared smokily, and she saw.

On the floor at her feet Walter Crex lay in a welter of blood. His shirt was torn almost free of his body and a trickle of dark blood oozed from his mouth.

Behind him, towering above him and breathing hard, stood the man she had seen on the trail when Crex had tried to kiss her.

While she strove for her breath, Phil found his. With the quickness of light he tore loose the strips of whang from his pistol holster and tossed them to Pedro.

"Tie his hands quickly," he said. "Now —" He turned to the astonished girl. "You're Miss Mathis. Let's talk."

"First let me thank you," she began breathlessly. But he stopped her.

"Wait a second! Pedro, drag that fool outside the house and keep him there till we come! Call up Hard Rock with the horses."

Pedro caught Crex by the shoulders and, with a strength that none would have suspected, dragged him outside the house and in a low tone hailed Hard Rock. The low patter of hoofbeats told of his arrival. Then Phil turned to the wondering girl.

"It's my turn to talk now," he said. "I'll not keep you long. We must leave here at once. I am Phil Kynaston and together you and I own the Lying Y Ranch."

"You? You are Philip Kynaston? I do not understand." The wonder rang in her tones. "What does all this mean?"

"Of course you don't understand. I'll try to make it clear."

And in short terse sentences he told her all that had taken place since he got that letter at the Cross Bar Ranch. He told her what Ben Crocker had told him; he told her all that he had seen and learned and experienced since his arrival in the Amargo Valley, and throughout the tale she stood silent, her eyes wide in wonder.

"Why didn't you tell me who you were when you helped me down on the path below the pass?" she asked.

"Because Walter Crex was with you," he said. "I am trying to get evidence to send him and his father and Marks to jail, and if he knew who I am, I'd never get the evidence. They'd cover up. I think I have about all I need now. You'll come with us of course?"

Still she stood staring wordlessly at him.

CHAPTER XVI

"I'll Take Your Gun!"

PHIL was first to break the silence. Too much time had already been lost. Leo Crex with his men might turn up at any moment. But the girl could not travel the road by which they had come. They must return by way of the pass, though there was the danger that Crex's men might be there to meet the stolen cattle.

"You can see that we must leave at once," he said shortly. "Every second increases our danger. Will you trust yourself to me?"

There was a curious light in her eyes that seemed focused on him as though soul questioned soul. What she read in his eyes evidently satisfied her.

"I think I would trust you anywhere," she said a trifle wildly.

"Good. I'll see to it that you never regret it. Now—can you ride? No. I see you have no clothes for that."

"Oh, but I have. My riding clothes are in one of my bags. Wait." In five minutes she was back, booted and spurred and laughing at his surprise.

"We'll have to leave the bags here till we can get them," he said. "We must hurry so's to get back across the pass before Crex can get his men there to stop us. Hard Rock," he hailed in a low tone.

A quick stamp, a rattle of horses, and Hard Rock checked the lead horses before the door. The dim light of the candle was sufficient to let him see what had happened.

"You might have let me in on it," he growled. "If I'd got my hands on one of the Crex outfit you'd not be bothered with a prisoner. What'll we do with him?"

"Take him with us, of course. He'll do to trade off if we get in a mess," said Phil grimly. "Pedro, saddle two of those horses in the stables and be mighty quick about it."

In ten minutes Pedro was back with two saddled horses and Phil turned to Walter Crex.

"Get on that horse," he said gruffly. "And be sure you make no fuss. If you do, you'll be sorry for it."

Crex looked at him sharply, started to speak, but caught a look in Phil's face that told him much. He moved over to a horse and was hoisted clumsily into saddle. Then Pedro took a lariat and roped his feet under the horse's belly.

"Take the reins, Pedro," said Phil. "Now, Crex, if you make any attempt to raise a fuss or to escape, I'll kill you. Sabe that and it'll save your future mistakes."

A startled grunt from Pedro stopped further speech. That grunt spoke of trouble, big trouble. A lantern bobbed slowly around the rear of the house bumping against a shapeless mass. Then Phil, leaping for it, snatched the lantern and held it high so that its smoky gleam fell squarely on the face of the newcomer—a woman!

"Josefa!" And Pedro had her by the arm in a frenzied grip. "Josefa . . . . *mi hermana* . . . . my sister," he cried. "*Por Dios!* They told me you were dead a year ago. But I sought Crex to pay. Oh yes! There will be payment for this."

She burst into vociferous weeping and Phil saw great sweat-drops gemming her swarthy face. Then he turned to Pedro, who was shaking as with an ague.

"What does this mean?" he asked sharply. "Who is this woman?"

"Señor . . . ." The whining tone of the peon cook had hardened and he had seemed to gain inches. "Señor, I speak as man to man. Listen—this woman . . . . Leo Crex and his son and men be damned. This is my night. Listen, señor . . . .

"This man Crex came, years ago, señor, when I was a young man. There were the three of us. My mother, my sister Josefa and I. First there was a debt of five hundred pesos owed him. Then he got our wool. Then I went away to get money, and when I came back Josefa was gone and my mother was dying. I could not leave her, señor. You will understand that. I had to stay to close her eyes at the last. And Josefa had gone with the man Crex—Leo Crex!

"I found there had been no marriage!"

PHIL shook his head and Ellen, her chin cupped in her hands, stood staring. She sensed the tone but not the full import of the words.

"Then, señor, you can not wholly understand me. For years I hunted them to bring her back to her own place. I did not know then what I have learned since—that time changes all things. I hoped to find and bring back the child who had

been taken away. I came to Trecientos, señor, and I found her. And then the man Crex found out who I was and what I came for . . . . See!"

With a vigorous twist he tore loose his shirt and disclosed a brawny shoulder across which ran a line of white scars like a score of thorn pricks.

"*Nopal* . . . . Prickly pear . . . ." said Pedro grimly. "He ordered his men to rope me like a steer. They did it. They roped me and tied my hands and a dozen of his men hunted me. They stripped me to the waist and flogged me as I ran dragged by a lariat on a horse. Flogged me with the leaves of the *nopal* . . . ."

"Good God, man!" Phil knew well how terrible those thick, fleshy paddles of the prickly pear, with their hundreds of thorns, were.

"See now, señor." Pedro flung his hands wide in protest. "What happened then was years ago. After that the man Crex, tiring of her, gave her to one of his men—Quinn. She objected and was branded!"

"Pedro," Phil said, and Ellen Mathis noted the gentleness in his voice, "we must leave at once. Tell your sister she is welcome to come with us. If we get back to our own place I will see that she is taken care of."

"Señor, she will not come. She says she cannot go back to our family disgraced.

"Señor, ride on and I will catch you up. Go, I beg you."

Hard Rock seized the reins of Crex's horse and started up the trail heading for the pass, and Phil, with Ellen at his elbow, followed.

"Who was that woman?" the girl asked. "She tried to be decent to me but she is scared to death of the man Crex."

"She has reason to be," said Phil grimly. "Thank God! There comes the moon. We can see our way now."

THE great silver moon shot up over the dark line of the Espinazos and every ridge and tree stood out as hard as iron against the silver blanket. Against that blanket they could see the dark ribbon of the trail as it wove in and out among the brush heading for the high pass that frowned above them.

"If Crex's men are ahead of us at the pass, someone will be out of luck," muttered Phil to Hard Rock. "Stop a minute," he said sharply. "That sounds like a horse coming at a trot from the direction of the pass."

The steady *clop-clop* of a trotting horse came to them as they moved a few yards off the trail. Then Phil moved out into the dim path and reined back into the shadow.

He knew that oncoming rider must be from the Lying Y, or one of Crex's men, and he sat silent till the man, nearly abreast of him, jerked his horse to a halt and dropped a hand to his holster.

"Who in hell are you?" he asked curtly.

"Walter Crex is here," said Phil briefly. "Who're you?"

"Oh. Then that's all right. I'm Dyer. I'm just over from Marks' bunch. Where's Walter?"

"Over here a bit. There's been a kind of a mix-up."

"Mix-up, hell," said Dyer hotly. "Lengel and me with a few of Sam Marks' men that he kin trust has worked five thousand head up to the pass. They're millin' right now on the other side of the crest. We didn't want to risk a stampede night-drivin' till Crex's men get there to hold 'em. The whole valley's full of those damned gold seekers. We've got to be careful or they'll discover what's doin'. Hurry up your men. Them cattle have got to be hidden by daylight."

"Where's Sam Marks?" asked Phil quickly.

"Marks? He put Lengel in charge of the herd for Crex. He had to see Lynn Davis," said Dyer. "They're plannin' to make a survey and Marks is to help Davis. What's Walter Crex doin' here?" he asked suddenly. "Marks told me Walter was ridin' herd over that girl, the owner of the Lyin' Y, and he said—"

Before that last word was out of his mouth an avalanche dropped on him. Phil seeing he could get no more information, simply "bull-dogged" him as deftly as he ever had a big steer in the many rodeos where he had ridden. Red Dyer went to earth with a muffled crash and suddenly found a gun muzzle almost in his mouth.

"I'll take your gun." Phil snatched it and flung it far into the brush. "Now you can get up, but be damned sure your hands are well behind you."

Dyer rose cursing steadily but his hands were behind him. He had not missed the note in Phil's voice.

"Get the lariat off my saddle, Miss Mathis," said Phil sharply. "So . . . .

That's right. Now tie an end to this man's arm above the elbow and pull. Now take a turn around the other arm and pull tight. That's fine—for us."

In two minutes it was done and Dyer was as helpless as a trussed turkey with both arms tied loosely at the elbow behind his back. But there was no knot on his tongue.

"Sorry to bother you," said Phil politely. "I'm Kynaston, half-owner of the Lyin' Y, you know. I found your tally-book over in the corral, Dyer. I reckon that book'll send you up for ten years when I settle in full with Crex and Marks.

"By the way, if you see Crex you can tell him what I say. That I'm going straight in to Pintano and I'll force him to a showdown. He'll have to show papers and I'll attach every head of stock on Trecientos. You might tell him, too, that he and I are due for a showdown."

Then Dyer recognized Walter Crex and his eyes bulged. He tried to speak but his voice was drowned in the rush of an oncoming horse as Pedro reined up by Phil.

"We've got Dyer too," said Phil warmly. "Take a lariat and rope him by the neck to a tree, Pedro. We'll leave him here for his friends to find. Hurry up."

IN a few turns of a lariat Dyer was roped to a tree, and the party headed up the trail on the last slope that gave on the pass. Then for the first time Phil found time to talk to Ellen. Startled at the events precipitated by her arrival she asked questions that he meticulously answered, trying to explain all that had taken place. In a half hour she knew everything that had happened and her eyes were big with surprise and relief. She glanced admiringly more than once at this tall outlaw—by his own confession—who rode with her, stirrup to stirrup.

"Señor," said Pedro suddenly. "Listen."

Through the moonlight, borne to them on the night wind, there came the mournful lowing of innumerable steers and cows. Then their horses caught the mass-smell and threw up their heads and danced among the rocks.

"They're doin' just what Dyer said," said Phil. "They're holdin' the herd the other side of the crest to wait for Crex's men. They know the country better than Marks' men can know it. Thank goodness we got here before Crex's men. I'm goin' to drive that herd back down the pass if I can stampede it," he said. "And I think I can. Hard Rock, you an' Pedro take all Crex's cartridges and give me all you can spare. I want a lot."

Working with frantic haste he wrenched the bullets from the shells and heaped the powder in his hat and the powder from a hundred forty-five cartridges makes a considerable showing. They were in the very jaws of the pass and he knew what would happen.

A match dropped in that powder in the very face of the sleepy herd would set it off in a wild stampede that would never stop till the cattle were run off their feet. All the devils in hell could not check it. He moved the horses back into the shadow and waited.

Bud Lengel of the Lying Y, who was in charge of the herd, was lazy. Driving cattle through that pass was like pouring water down a pipe. There was no exit to either side. No need for a point rider or for flankers. Crex's men could pick up the cattle after they had crossed the pass. Bud cursed Crex for his slowness in not having men to meet the herd as he with a half dozen men "dragged" in the rear of the cattle.

A moment later the head of the herd churned in the narrow pass and Phil and Hard Rock wrestled with their crazy horses while Pedro "rode herd" over Ellen and Walter Crex. The latter cursed steadily and struggled with his lashings. But they had been well tied and would not give.

"Take my horse." Phil swung out of saddle and thrust his reins to his partner. "Mind the flare now. There'll be no noise. Just a blaze. Don't let the ponies break loose."

He struck a match, cupped it, and laid the burning stick athwart the line of loose powder that he had laid to the big charge. The spark caught, but almost went out. Then it flared again.

Unlike old-fashioned black powder that goes off in one huge puff, high-power powder burns slowly. For a couple of seconds that eating spark devoured the powder line heading for the heap of reddish grains. One second—two—three! Then a great flare arose like the backlash of a dynamite blast but without the

report, and the whole sky was lit by a sudden yellow flare against which trees, rocks, men, cows and horses stood out in outline hard as iron.

A startled *whoof* from the leading cattle, a sudden churning of the mass; then tired animals plunged in fright as bulls and cows and steers climbed excitedly atop each other fighting and wrestling, falling and lowing.

The next moment the head of that big herd was turned, and, in frenzied terror helped out by shrill yells and the biting, lashing ends of the two snapping lariats, the living wave surged back down the pass to the terrible accompaniment of a noise that once heard is never forgotten. The click and rattle of ten thousand bony hocks as the frantic cattle plunged down the slope in headlong fright.

The stampede was on!

"We can do no more." Phil wiped his face on his sleeve. "They'll run till hell freezes over," he said as he faced Ellen, who regarded him almost adoringly in the moonlight. "What now, Pedro?"

"Señor, I spoke further with Josefa. She told me much of what Crex meant to do with the señorita here. Also she said that Leo Crex and the man Quinn will go or have gone, she is not sure which, to the Bulso de Diablo. Crex means to occupy the mine and hold it till the surveyor Davis and Marks make the survey that will give the mine to Trecientos. Crex says that possession is nine points of the law."

"He's right at that," said Phil grimly. "I wanted to go straight in to Pintano but it's very clear that our plans lead us now right to the Bulso de Diablo. Come on."

CHAPTER XVII

Evidence from the Grave

SAM MARKS heartily cursed Pintano's gold rush that sent a thousand men into the hills and made the business of rebranding and driving off other men's cattle too dangerous for a pastime. Since that rush started the cattle business had to be run at night.

He had to start those five thousand head of cattle across the Espinazos to Leo Crex. And, even more important, he himself must go with Lynn Davis to make that survey that would give the Bulso de Diablo to Trecientos and to himself. He rounded up Bud Lengel and Red Dyer and spoke with pointed profanity.

"You, Red, get across the pass and tell Crex that Lengel here will have the herd on your heels. Lengel, you take your men and work the herd up to the pass. When you get 'em across the pass and are on Trecientos land, hold 'em till Crex's men come for 'em. You'll have to drive at night. We can't take chances with these damned prospectors loose in the hills. Sabe?"

Both men understood clearly what was wanted. That herd, gathered from every little canyon over the broad ranges of the Lying Y, started at dawn.

All day long it trickled in living rivulets toward the Espinazos and when dusk fell the cattle were herded down into a box-canyon where water and grass were to be had. They were close-herded all the next day and at dusk the last phase of that march began that was to get them to the pass by night.

When Sam Marks saw the last of that herd he went at once for Davis. That survey was important to him and to Leo Crex.

Davis led Marks into his inner office, set bottle and glasses before him and busied himself with his instruments. When Marks had drunk he turned on Davis who was taking a big compass to pieces.

"How're you goin' to do this?" he asked.

"You know anything about compasses?" asked Davis.

"A little bit," said Marks guardedly. "I've made some compass surveys."

"Good. Then you'll be a real help. Here's a copy of the deed of Trecientos. You'll see from this sketch that the Lyin' Y and the Trecientos line run together, cheek by jowl, for miles. When they reach this point"—Davis laid a finger on the map—"they separate. The Lyin' Y goes right; Trecientos goes left and a big pocket is left between them.

"That pocket is the Bulso de Diablo. See? All right so far. Now listen. When this original survey was made transits were not used. Surveys were made with magnetic compasses. Now the compass varies each year. The agonic line—that's the true north line—swings westward each year by a certain fixed amount. I have figured out the correction of the compass—"

"I get you." Marks nodded and a slow grin grew on his face. "Then it's up to you to swing that line so the Bulso de Diablo falls inside the Trecientos line."

The more he thought of it the more important did it become. The title to the unclaimed land would lie in the scrip that Phil had won from Sturton. If the mine and the rich ore lay on the open range, the stranger would get it. The mine must not fall on the Lying Y land either. If it did, he and Crex would be ruined.

"How'll you do it?" he asked curtly.

Davis shook his head over some calculations. Then he looked up and grinned.

"I've got to have the compass needle held twenty degrees off its correct line," he said. "See? Then when I run the course as laid down in the deed, it'll show an error in the line as originally laid out. That'll throw the minin' land where you want it. I know what you're after. Don't talk to me about winterin' cattle in that place."

"Damned if I see how you'll shift the North Pole," said Marks.

"See here—" Suiting the action to the word, Davis pried the glass off a tiny pocket compass and removed the black iron needle. Then, after a half hour's sweating labor, he got the glass cover off his big compass, pried up the plate and deposited that tiny magnetic needle to one side of the needle of the big compass.

Then he replaced cover and glass and set it up—watched it carefully as the big needle swung full circle. Presently it shivered and hung poised over a reading that was twenty degrees off the true north.

"Now we're ready to start." Davis got his instruments and notebooks and loaded them with his camp equipment into his buckboard.

"You bein' able to run a compass simplifies it," he said. "I need a man and I was dubious about takin' a stranger. Sure you can read a compass?"

"Try me," said Marks confidently.

Davis set him problem after problem, all of which Marks solved readily.

"That's fine." Davis sat back and grinned. "That'll make it easy. Tracin' the old line is the part that needs an expert eye. With you to run the compass and turn off the angles, I can follow the old line—or make the new one where we need it. You'll run the compass. We'll start now."

The half-wild horses whirled them along the rough trail like leaves behind a train, the camp equipment and the instrument cases jolting behind them.

"It's twenty long miles to the Lyin' Y corner," said Marks. "We'd better camp in Squaw Canyon."

Davis nodded and produced a bottle. He was glad of a drink now; it seemed to kill the sense of shame that lay heavy on him. He had never done a thing like this before. He felt as though it had been blazoned to the world.

Squaw Canyon, a narrow little arroyo filled with standing dead sycamores, had some water in its pools and made a good camping place. They picketed the half-wild ponies, made their camp and after a leisurely supper turned in under the stars.

There was little sleep for Davis that night. An uneasy conscience makes a sleepless bed-fellow. Memories of his sick wife raced through his brain, coupled with visions of the man he had hoped to be—the man she thought he was.

"Honesty is the best policy," she was wont to quote. And then she would add, "But the man who is honest as a policy is not honest at all."

He was first out of his blankets in a cold dawn and when Marks rolled out the fire was already blazing.

THE fire did much more than warm Marks and Davis. It gave mute warning to four men and a girl riding over the back ranges of the foothills heading for the Bulso de Diablo. At first sight of the black smoke edged with white mist, Phil pulled his horse to a halt. Ellen Mathis, riding at his elbow, wondered at the look on his face. Behind him, Hard Rock Simms and Pedro guarding Walter Crex, waited his word.

"I can't guess who it can be," he muttered. "All the Lying Y men ought to be with Lengel."

He pitched out of saddle, ran to the next low crest and looked down into the camp, but it was too far away to allow recognition. Suddenly a quick, sharp exclamation from Pedro made him turn to see the latter motioning wildly to his left. And, while Phil was still in the act of rising to his feet, a whoop and a yell broke

the morning hush as a dozen mounted men swept around the hill-shoulder at full gallop and rode down toward them. It was Sheriff Girton and his posse.

"Sit tight," cautioned Phil in a quick, low tone. "This is a show-down. Let your guns alone."

He was barely in time. Pedro's hand was at his holster and Hard Rock's rifle was halfway out of the scabbard as Girton on a crop-eared gray raced along the slope with a dozen men at his heels riding "loose" to cover all avenues of escape.

"I reckon we've got you now, Mister Paul Kitts," he shouted as he jerked the gray to a halt. "Take their guns, Jewell."

"Hold on, Mister Sheriff." Phil grinned and Girton could not believe his eyes at such levity in a prisoner. "Listen to me, Sheriff, before you ask for our guns. After I've told you what I've got to say, the guns are yours if you want 'em."

Girton's men stared hard as they closed in on the group. They had heard Phil and Hard Rock cursed very completely but Ellen Mathis, lovely even after a night in the saddle, almost took their breath. The sight of Walter Crex with hands and feet lashed capped their wonder.

"By gracious," growled a man, "he can't be so rotten if he's sized up the Crex bunch right!" But Girton motioned for silence. Then he turned to Phil.

"What've you got to say?" he demanded. "I'm arrestin' Hard Rock Simms here for the murder of his partner, Scotty Rames. I'm arrestin' you, Paul Kitts, an' this here greaser as witnesses and maybe accessories, too, and—"

"Hold on. Where's the body of Scotty Rames?" demanded Phil. "Who's seen it? Who knows he's dead?"

"You'll see it in time," blustered Girton. "Go ahead, Jewell."

"Wait a bit, Sheriff." Phil held up his hand. "Rames was murdered. We'll take you to his body, but first you've got to listen to what I've got to say. In the first place—who am I?"

"Paul Kitts," said Girton.

"Wrong!" Phil laughed in his face. "I'm Philip Kynaston and I'm a half-owner of the Lying Y Ranch. This young lady, Miss Ellen Mathis, is the other owner. I took the name Paul Kitts when I came here because my old boss, Ben Crocker of the old Cross Bar—"

"I know him like I know the Malpais Bar," said Jewell energetically. "Go on, man!"

"Crocker warned me that Leo Crex and Sam Marks have been lootin' the Lyin' Y for years . . . ."

He talked for twenty minutes. There was no need now to talk against time. He had all the time he needed. They gathered about him in a close-held ring. When a range-bred man talks to range-bred men of stolen cattle and altered brands, of murder done on the range under the open sky, he is sure of an audience.

"You mean to tell me," spluttered Girton, "that this here man Simms did not kill Rames? Then who did it?"

"You come with us to the place where the body is and I hope to show you," said Phil.

"That's a bet. I'll sure play her as she lays," said Girton.

"Have you got an expert on gunshot wounds with you?" asked Phil. "He may be needed."

"Doc Lisle is here." Girton jerked his head at the group and Lisle came forward. "He knows more about gunshot wounds than any man I know. How far is it to this place where the body is?"

"I figger it as about a can o' beans and two cigarettes," said Hard Rock after an abstruse calculation. "That's the way them damned pack-ponies travel. I'll git you there in a hour."

If it was a little more than an hour, no one noticed. Girton rode in talk with Phil and the rest of the posse rode with one eye on pretty Ellen Mathis and the other on Walter Crex.

"Here we are." Hard Rock swung a hand at a red welt of earth. If his face twitched only Phil saw it. "There's what's left of the best partner a man ever had."

"You'd better keep a little back, Miss Ellen," said Phil. "Now, Girton, let your men dig."

Ellen backed away and the men, with knives and sharpened sticks scratched and dug till finally Doc Lisle waved them back and bent over a pile of earth-stained sacking. Twenty minutes passed.

"Well, Doc," said Girton presently. "What's the verdict?"

"Bullet wound in the back of the neck," quoth Lisle. "Made by a small-calibre, high-power bullet. It ain't there, though."

PHIL motioned to Hard Rock, who slouched up to him and held out a claw-like hand.

"The day we buried Rames," said Phil, "I found this bullet in his head. I'm only bein' held as a witness, so my testimony about the bullet is good. As I say, I took this bullet out of Rames." And he dropped the white bullet into Lisle's ready palm.

"This killed him. Hard Rock Simms had no gun of any kind. Later on I was in Pintano and Jerry Plack told me that Hard Rock Simms and Rames had both pawned their guns to him for cash to buy supplies for the trip. Their guns were both forty-fives. I bought back Hard Rock's rifle. He's got it now. Plack can prove what I say."

"That's all right," shouted a deep voice. "The question is—who killed Rames?"

"The man who had most to gain by his death," said Phil. "Leo Crex."

A long silence fell and the men stood staring at each other.

"You can't prove that," said Girton finally.

"No. I can't. But you can," said Phil. "Any rifle expert in this country can tell you, when he sees a rifle, if that bullet was fired from it. You men all know that Crex carries a thirty-thirty rifle. Get it and send it and the bullet to the federal expert in Denver. Damn it all, man! Use sense. Why would Hard Rock Simms kill his partner?"

"Why would Leo Crex kill him?" demanded Girton.

"Because he found Hard Rock Simms and Rames filing claims to lands in the Bulso de Diablo. Old Crex has been looting a mine there for years. Stealin' the ore. High-gradin' it. I tell you, Sheriff, the man's a murderer and a thief."

"If that's so, I'd like to lay hands on him," said Girton.

"You're lucky you can't," said Walter Crex, waking suddenly to life. "When him and Quinn git back from that mine and learn—" He gulped and sat back. He had not intended to say so much. If his father and Quinn had gone to the mine to hold it till Davis and Marks could justify them by the survey, that was no one's business.

"So that's where he is, eh?" Phil almost snatched at Girton's arm. "It's clearin' up a little now, Sheriff," he said. "Hard Rock Simms and I staked out certain ore-claims over in the Bulso de Diablo. This man, Leo Crex, is over there now. I demand an investigation and you dare not refuse me."

"I don't want to," said Girton frankly. "But who's that over there?" And he pointed to the squat figure of Lynn Davis outlined against the sky behind a distant ridge. He had a red-and-white pole in his hands and he was shouting loudly to a distant figure that bent over a compass tripod a mile away.

"Just as I told you," said Phil coolly. "They're makin' the survey that is to throw the mine onto Crex's land. It backs up into the hills here."

They saw Marks pick up the tripod and head for Davis; then both men fell into hot debate that did not cease as Girton and his party rode up to them.

"I tell you, you damned fool, you made a mistake," said Davis. "The line lies here." And he jerked a hand to his left.

"Not on this course," said Marks stubbornly. "It's north twenty-seven, ten east, an' that's what I gave you. Think I'm a fool?"

"I know damned well you are. Come on. Let's get over to the real important place—the Bulso de Diablo. These places here don't matter."

"Uh-huh. I tell you one thing," said Marks venomously. "You'll not stay county surveyor if you don't throw that line where Crex says to throw it."

"Oh, shut up," said Davis hotly. "Damned if I can understand it. I put a small needle under the big one. It's enough to throw out the Big Dipper. I have checked up your readings. They're all right. There's been no mistake in that. The old line was wrong. That's where the trouble lies. The original survey was wrong and ours is right. Sure as hell that Bulso de Diablo lies on Trecientos land."

"Come on over and tell Leo Crex right now," said Marks excitedly.

"Where *is* Crex?" demanded Sheriff Girton sharply and got attention for the first time.

"Hello, Sheriff." Marks glowered at him. "If you've just got to know, Leo's over in the Bulso de Diablo. He learned his line was run crooked years ago and then them men"—he waved at Phil—"was aimin' to file some claims over there. Leo and a man is over there to keep off all trespassers till the survey's

been made. Who are these men, anyhow?"

"I happen to be Phil Kynaston, part owner of the Lying Y," said Phil evenly. "You'll be interested, Mister Marks, in knowing that I found Red Dyer's tally-book in the corral where he had rounded up a lot of cattle and changed their brands to the Bar Chevron. Last night I met that herd in the pass. I got your man Dyer and he confessed a lot. I stampeded your stolen herd down the pass . . . ."

Marks merely goggled at him. Speech was beyond him.

"I thought—" he began.

"No you didn't. You only thought you thought. You believed this young lady, Miss Mathis, part-owner with me in the Lying Y, was being held by Crex at Trecientos while you and he looted the Lying Y of its cattle. You're all wet, Mister Marks, and you're in one hell of a fix."

"You better go tell your troubles to Leo Crex," Marks croaked. "He'll be glad to see you. He's over in the Bulso de Diablo right now."

"Come on then," said Girton. He wanted to reach the end of this puzzle that was rapidly becoming too complicated for him. "Have you got any horses, Marks?"

"Sure. We drove over here in a buckboard and camped last night. We'll follow you."

"I'll leave a couple of men with you to see that you do," said Girton cryptically, grown suddenly cautious. "Jewell, you and Winn bring Davis an' Marks over to the Bulso de Diablo. Come on with me, the rest o' you people. I'm aimin' to cinch this matter right now."

CHAPTER XVIII

Under New Management?

THE past three days had taken heavy toll of Ellen and had left their mark. Though she did not know it, those marks were the new hallmarks of her future character and would never be entirely erased. The old-time levity and heedlessness had gone as marks disappear from a slate, but her pretty face showed the strain. Phil glanced at her and liked what he saw.

"I like to think," he said slowly, "that this means the Lying Y is passing under a new management. I hope so. I hope to see this Amargo Valley filled with grazing cattle and growing crops. I hope it means a revival of the old time frontier justice that did not miss. We'll see shortly."

"I think Sheriff Girton wants to speak to you." She pointed to Girton, who was motioning to Phil.

As Phil rode up to him, the big man looked him over appraisingly. Girton was big and heavy and slow in all his mental processes. He had played politics as he understood them but he was not innately crooked. Moreover he was morally sure now that Leo Crex had used him as a tool and like most slow-witted men he was angry at last at the thought.

"Look a-here Kynaston," he said curtly. "If you're right, I've been barkin' at a knot. If your statements are true—"

"I'll prove every one of them," said Phil quietly.

"Here we are. Yonder's the Bulso de Diablo," Girton said.

"You'd better keep under cover," Phil said sharply. "Crex is in that glory hole and he's probably got some men with him."

A shrill yell from the hill told that they had been seen and the next minute Leo Crex's tall figure loomed against the background of red shale.

"What do you all want?" he demanded sharply. "You're trespassin' on my land and I'm warnin' you off right now."

"Tell him it's not his land," said Phil quickly. "Here's the proof." He thrust the roll of scrip into Girton's hand. "I won that scrip off Sturton at the Malpais Saloon. If this land belongs to anyone, it belongs to me."

Girton did not need to read that scrip. He knew it of old. He thrust the roll back into Phil's hand and cupped his hands about his mouth.

"Come down," he shouted in a bull roar that was flung back from the rocky walls of the canyon. "We got to talk this over."

"Who's 'we'?" demanded Crex. "I'll meet you man to man or I'll bring one man. You kin have two; you bein' on'y half a man."

Girton waved agreement and signaled his party to dismount. Then he placed a man in charge and signing to Phil and Doc Lisle to come with him he moved down to the flat where Leo Crex and Quinn already stood.

They met by a great boulder and eyed

each other like dogs about to start a fight. Crex spoke first:

"Well, Girton," he snarled, "you've changed sides, huh? You mind what I told you?"

"Yeah. I do. An' mind, too, that I'm the sheriff of Amargo County an' charges are made against you, Mister Crex. This man, Philip Kynaston—" And he pointed to Phil.

"Who?" Crex's mouth dropped frankly open. "Kynaston, huh? This ain't Kynaston, I reckon. This man is Kitts. Paul Kitts! He said so himself and you heard him."

"That's all right. He's proved his identity and he's charged you with the murder of Scotty Rames — with theft and robbery and kidnapin' an'—"

Crex laughed uneasily. "Why not mention arson, too?" he asked.

"Listen to me, Crex." Girton strove to make his tone ingratiating. "We've got the bullet that killed Rames. We've got the body. It's a thirty-thirty and these men claim it was fired from your rifle. It's sure to your advantage to prove that it wasn't."

"Where'd you find that bullet?" asked Crex quickly.

"In the dead body of Scotty Rames. We found it where Hard Rock buried it."

"What'd I tell you?" asked Crex triumphantly.

"Where Hard Rock Simms buried him after you murdered him," said Phil gently.

"You damned interferin' liar." Crex burst into flame. "Why would I want to kill Rames?"

"To keep all knowledge of gold on this land from becoming known."

"You fool. This land's mine. In fee simple. It belongs to Trecientos rancho and there comes the man who'll prove it." And he pointed to Davis and Marks coming slowly down the hill. They were arguing loudly as they came and their raised voices were audible.

"BOTH surveys agree on that, you fool." It was Davis speaking. "At that point the line is the dividing line between the Lying Y and Trecientos. The big tract of free land lies back there. It's just like the letter Y. The mine lies in the angle of the Y. The only question at issue is—does the Bulso de Diablo lie on Trecientos land? If not, then it lies on the Lying Y. No room for doubt about that."

"It sounds like an interestin' question," muttered Girton. "I've seen civil war started over less."

Crex, with his eyes fixed on Davis, could not stand the strain.

"Hey, you, Davis," he shouted. "Let me see your map with the notes. I sabe something about mapmaking." He seized the papers and pored over them. "Who ran the compass?" he asked finally.

"Marks," said Davis. "He runs one pretty well, too. I checked all his courses myself."

"Come up to the glory hole with me for a bit, Sam," said Crex dully. "I want to go over this matter with you alone before I talk. You too, Davis."

But Davis had no mind to thrust his head into any Crex trap.

"I'll wait here," he said.

"I give you an hour, Crex," said Girton heavily. "Then I'll hear any statement you care to make, and at the same time I'll take your gun. For your own protection," he added hastily as Crex rose.

"You'll take my gun like hell," said Crex as he threw his rifle into the hollow of his arm and backed off to join Marks. "I aim to look over these notes and this map of my own land, with only my friend Sam Marks. If this is my land I want it. If it ain't—I don't. If it ain't mine what am I doin' here?"

"That's what several of us would like to know," said Phil.

"Come on, Marks, and bring that compass with you. I'll be back in an hour—if I choose." And Crex, with Marks carrying the compass and the notebooks, at his heels, scrambled up the sharp slope and disappeared over the edge of the "fill" before the glory hole.

The moment Leo Crex entered that cut he turned on Marks like a newly released panther.

"What the hell have you done?" he demanded. "Let's see the notebook and the map. Give me the protractor and your pencil."

For nearly all of that hour allowed them the two men pored and figured. Like most Western men interested in lands and mines they had a practical working knowledge of surveying and this was easy. So easy that one could not question the result. But that result was

diametrically opposed to what Leo Crex had wanted.

"Damn it all." He wiped the clammy sweat from his face. "This—look here, Sam! This here map *shows the mine on Lyin' Y land.*"

Marks nodded wordlessly, his eyes on the map.

"Did Davis monkey with the compass like he promised?"

"He sure did," said Marks positively. "Look here." And Marks raised the compass glass and showed Crex the small needle inserted under the glass to divert the needle. "That magnetized steel would move the North Pole," he said. "Damned if I kin sabe what has happened. Davis done as fine a piece of rotten work as I ever seen."

"It looks like the beans are spilled," said Crex dully.

"They sure are," agreed Marks. "That man Kynaston got across the pass and got the girl away from your place. Then when they were on the way back across the pass they met Lengel with the herd and stampeded it an' brung Walter in a prisoner."

As word after word dropped from Sam Marks' lips, Leo Crex stared at him as though he thought he had gone crazy. Finally he put a hand to his own throat and gulped for air.

"What in hell are you talkin' about?" he demanded, striving for speech. "Say that again."

Marks repeated it. He realized at last how completely all their plans had failed.

"Kynaston got Dyer's tally-book," he said. "They caught Dyer, too, and he told 'em a lot. That means that I'll go to jail. They'll get me for rustlin' cattle. You know how much mercy a cattleman jury will give. An' you—Huh! They'll get you fer murder most likely and kidnapin' and cattle rustlin'."

"And most likely Walter will turn state's evidence to save his own hide," said Leo Crex, who had a fine appreciation of his son's characteristics.

"Maybe if you'd agree to withdraw all claims to this mine here and if you an' me was to agree to restore the lost cattle they might bar suit," said Marks hopefully.

CREX rose and walked slowly up and down the cut while Quinn and Marks watched him. They knew even if he would not acknowledge it, that Sheriff Girton would never compromise such a case. It was too important. Crex's face was pale and his shoulders bowed. Mentally he cursed his luck as he eyed that cut where he had spent so many hours taking out gold that did not belong to him.

"You might be able to buy them off," said Marks. "It can't hurt to try."

"I'll have to try it, I reckon. But it sure does go against the grain. The hour's most up . . . ."

Moving like a sleep-walker, he drifted along the wall to the heading and stopped by the heap of discarded tools that lay as he and his peons had left them. He picked up a big smooth-faced hammer.

"Not one of the men could use this," he said with a sort of pride. "I can swing it with one hand. Look here—"

Even a little thing like that can take a man's mind off his worries for a second. Leo Crex stood admiring his own skill as he swung the heavy hammer from right to left and back again.

"I wish to heaven that man Kynaston's head was under it," snapped Marks venomously.

The name did it. It recalled to Leo Crex the cause of all his trouble.

"I wish it was," he gritted between his teeth. "By God! I'd smash it . . . . like this . . . ."

And he brought the steel hammer down, crashing on the short iron drill that Hard Rock had so carefully placed in the old drill hole long ago. The smooth face of the hammer lit fair and square on the drill!

Far down in the valley, a quarter of a mile below that glory hole Phil and Girton, waiting by Ellen Mathis; saw the whole hill-shoulder above them quiver and shake. Then it rose suddenly as a man slowly raises his bed-clothes on his body.

Stones and earth rose in a sudden rush that obscured the sun and a great cloud of yellow, greasy smoke swirled along the hillside and a roar like none that they had ever heard broke from the cut. It echoed and re-echoed among the higher crags. Then came the slow rush of falling rocks and—silence!

Every man in the valley leaped to his feet and the startled horses fought for freedom. Only Hard Rock Simms did not move.

"Quick men!" Davis leaped for the hill.

"He must have had dynamite there and some exploded. Come on . . . ."

"You stay here, Miss Ellen." Phil paused by the shocked girl. "I'll be back in a minute." And he followed the rush of men up hill.

They were gone a long time and when he came three long blankets were carried behind him by men who would not have touched Quinn or Leo Crex or Sam Marks in life if it could have been avoided.

"Dynamite, of course," said Davis volubly. "He just didn't know how to handle it."

"I don't feel that way," said Hard Rock grimly. "It looks to me like he handled it pretty good. He sure done a good piece o' work. What about that map, Davis?"

"Oh that—" Davis became all professional. "There's no question about that map. The mine belongs on the land of the Lyin' Y. It belongs, I suppose, to Mister Kynaston here and to Miss Mathis."

WHILE some of the men investigated the torn shaft entrance, and others dug a long trench under a madrono bush, Phil drew Ellen aside.

"You've lived through a chapter of horrors," he said. "I want to get you back to Pintano to show you that the West is not what you must think it. I'd like to make you forget this last week. May I try?"

She glanced up at him and her lips trembled but she said not a word. He took her hands very gently in his own as one might handle a very precious thing.

"I—I don't feel that I want to forget it all," she said. "There are some things that make very precious memories."

"Look there, Doc"—Hard Rock nudged the old "medicine man" of Pintano in the ribs. "It looks to me like the Lyin' Y's gettin' ready to operate under a joint ownership. They'll git the cattle back an' they've got the mine—"

"Yep. That scrip gives Kynaston an unquestionable title."

"Hell man," said Hard Rock. "The mine's on Lyin' Y land—or ain't it?"

"Listen here, Simms . . . ." Lisle drew his companion aside. "If you repeat what I'm goin' to tell you, I'll swear you're a liar and I never said it . . . . Who ran that compass?"

"Sam Marks. So he said, and Davis said so too."

"No wonder that compass threw the mine on the Lyin' Y land," said Doc Lisle. "Old Sam Marks'd throw the North Star out of its kelter . . . ."

"Of course he was damned crooked," said Hard Rock.

"It wasn't that. I did the best I could to keep him straight," said Doc Lisle grinning. "About eight years ago Marks broke his leg. His pony threw him. I set that leg, an'—"

"What's that got to do with the compass?" demanded Hard Rock.

"I patched up that leg with a steel splice bar. It was seven inches long and it was in the leg that he had right under the compass needle when he was readin' the angles. I hoped that plate'd keep Marks straight through life, but it didn't. I reckon that was too much to expect. However, we'll not say a word about that. Look will you—"

Doc Lisle, hoary old practitioner who had roughed it for twenty years in Pintano since the place was only a patch of prickly pear, took one glance at Phil and Ellen standing half behind a boulder. The light of the setting sun was in her face and her eyes held a glow that owed nothing to any earthly source.

They strolled back to the campfire where Pedro was making coffee.

"Señor," he said to Hard Rock, "this day I have seen the justice of the Most High. Quinn was killed and Crex, too, with Marks. Losing hands were dealt them, señor. It is justice."

"I reckon that's right, Pedro." He rose and strolled away uneasily. Remembering how he had placed that blast to catch the man who had murdered his old partner, he grinned a little. "I hope old Scotty sleeps well tonight," he muttered. "Lucky or unlucky hands don't matter much, but I'm damned glad I *sanded the pack.*"

"Hard Rock . . . ." Phil's voice rose over the camp babble about the fire. "We're headin' right back for the Lyin' Y in the mornin'. Miss Mathis is goin' to live there too . . . ."

At that the silence about the fire broke up in a shout and Phil turned away to Ellen, with a smile to answer the adoring light in her eyes.

THE END

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A Flaming Reception

By JAMES FINLEY RUSSELL

HORSE and rider slithered to a stop before the dimly lit ranch house. Jim Gorse, bedding down on the couch in his father's office, heard them coming and leaped for the front door, buckling on his gunbelt.

The young man's tired eyes, deep-sunken from lack of sleep, matched the lines in his tanned face. Those lines had been etched there since his father's brutal murder three nights before, when Black Jans and his renegade outlaws had appeared suddenly at the ranch. They had shot down the old man in cold blood, wounded three punchers, and ridden away again, driving before them six hundred head of cattle.

"Who's there?" Jim called, his ear close to the door.

"It's me, Jim," came back a faint, feminine voice.

With a gasp of astonishment Jim swung the door open.

"Ollie!" he exclaimed, noting swiftly

the girl's dust-covered costume, the droop in her strong young shoulders.

"Jim!" She tried bravely to keep her voice steady. "Black Jans ambushed Dad and his posse tonight as they were coming through Gypsum Canyon!"

"Sit down, Ollie." Jim spoke softly, but the girl sensed the grim deadliness in his quiet voice. "Now then—"

"They were coming back by the short-cut," Ollie hastened to explain. "They'd been trailing Jans, you know."

"Yeah, I know," interrupted Jim tensely. "What happened in the canyon? Was yore dad—" He left the question unfinished.

"No, thank God, not killed, Jim. But hurt bad. A few of the posse got through, bringing Dad with them. They're at the Bar-K-Bar now. I rode out there with Doc Saunders, and Dad sent me here to you. He wants you to take over his work till he can ride again." She reached into a pocket, held out her hand.

"Where's Dan Brodie?" asked Jim, taking the sheriff's star and slowly pinning it on. "He's deputy, yuh know."

"Dead, Jim. He'd been scouting Jans' place, the Stronghold, and had just caught up again with the posse as they rode into the canyon. He told Dad that Black Jans is raiding Sweet Water Wells tomorrow night."

"The Wells!" growled Jim. "That means Red's back again. Black's shore tuh do something extra devilish whenever that kid brother o' his shows up."

OLIVE WILKS watched Jim closely, a tender light in her tired eyes. She understood the compelling urge which had been driving Jim relentlessly to avenge the death of his father.

She knew, too, that young as he was, the Happy Valley ranchers would gladly follow his leadership. All had suffered from raids of Black Jans' outlaws, cruelest of all the renegade hordes infesting the Border.

It never occurred to Jim to refuse the responsibility of "repping" for the sheriff. With his usual directness he at once submerged his own desires in the greater need of the valley.

"Wait here, Ollie," he said, rousing at last. "Keno'll drive yuh back tuh the Bar-K. Yuh're too tired tuh ride."

"What are you going to do?" she wanted to know.

"Get Black Jans," he replied simply. "He got my dad and he's tried tuh get yores. Black's raised all the hell he's goin' tuh round here."

"Is it to be the showdown, Jim?" Somehow she *had* to ask that question.

"I reckon it is," nodded Jim. "Black'll take 'bout half his men tuh the Wells with him, leavin' the rest at the Stronghold with Red. We'll wipe it out tomorra night while he's away, an' bring Red back with us. Black'll be a curly wolf when he learns we got Red."

"And he'll wipe out the valley in return!"

"I reckon not. He'll find us waitin' for him."

"You'll be careful, won't you, Jim?" Impulsively she laid her gloved hands on his shoulders.

"Shore I'll be careful," he told her tenderly, slipping his arms about her and holding her close for one brief moment. Then he was gone.

Five minutes after Keno drove away with her, a dozen grim-faced, heavily-armed punchers were racing to every ranch in the valley. At each stop they told the same story.

"Sheriff's posse got wiped out in Gypsum Canyon today, folks. Jans—yeah. Jim Gorse's headin' another tuh clean up the Stronghold tomorra night. Black'll be away, but Red'll be there with plenty men. If yuh want tuh string along, meet Jim in Sandy at nine o'clock."

THE Stronghold was so named because it was the headquarters of the biggest bandit horde on the Border and also because of the many loopholes in the adobe-and-plank walls of the threescore buildings ranged in two close-packed rows on either side of a wide, rutted street.

Almost half of the buildings here were saloons, or dives even worse. Women there were, naturally, and riff-raff from both sides of the river seeking sanctuary, willing to do anything in return for the outlaw band's protection. It was a more or less floating population, but on occasion the town had harbored as many as a hundred fighting men.

Fully sixty were there now, raucously, riotously celebrating the younger Jans'

return. There were no guards, no outposts, for the Stronghold had long since become contemptuous of danger, fancying itself secure behind the terrifying reputation of its notorious leader.

Jim, knowing this, counted on it for a surprise attack. With forty picked men he descended on it from out the night and before the revelers realized what was happening, half the town was ablaze. A drunk, reeling from a saloon, spied them first. Sobered instantly, he let out a yell, went for his six-gun, ducking back inside as he did so.

"Rangers!" he yowled. "Come on! Drag yore guns!"

Jim spurred recklessly after him, halfway through the swinging doors, both hands filled, Colts roaring.

The crowd inside, demoralized by the sudden attack and hampered by numbers, surged for the nearest exits, many firing blindly into their own ranks. Jim's horse was shot under him, blocking the doorway as it fell. Jim leaped to safety outside.

The fight now became general. Above the groans of the dying rose shouted curses, the sharp rattle of gunfire, screams of wounded horses. Quarter was neither asked nor given, except to the women. With the savage ferocity of cornered rats, the men of the Stronghold fought back.

A puncher, with a wounded man up behind him, charged through the swirling smoke.

"Jim Gorse!" he shouted. "Where's Jim Gorse?"

"What yuh want of him?" a smothered voice yelled back.

"Tell 'im a coupla the boys corralled Red an' are snakin' him back tuh Sandy fast as their broncs can leg it!"

"Jim's at the Palace! I'll tell 'im!" Sleepy Weeks, emerging from a smoldering dive, a dripping neckerchief over nose and mouth, blinked red-rimmed eyes at the big saloon three doors below. Its roof was blazing fiercely, but shooting was still going on inside. Sleepy took one look at the roof, and raced for the front door.

"Jim! Hey, Jim! Where be yuh?" he shouted, sticking his head inside, choking in the thick smoke.

"Coming!"

"Hurry, Jim! Damn roof's saggin'!"

"Boys out?"

"Hell, yes! Fer gosh's sake, hurry, Jim!"

"Coming!"

Sleepy dodged back as a burning timber crashed to the floor in front of him. Then, cursing savagely, he kicked it aside as Jim staggered through the smoke, a dead man slung over one shoulder.

"Hell, Jim—"

"Couldn't—leave him—tuh roast," gasped Jim, eyes streaming.

There came an ominous roar from overhead. Sparks showered downward.

"Hi! Dammit, come on!" Sleepy's long arms reached out, grabbed both Jim and his burden, and literally hurled the three of them into the hot dust of the street. Behind them the roof caved in with a crackling, splintering boom.

JIM eased himself to a sitting position, slipping off his right boot, tied his neckerchief around his leg where a bullet had bored through during the fight inside the saloon. His shirt was smoking from the intense heat.

"Where's the boys?" he asked, thoughtfully eyeing Sleepy as he turned the dead man over to look at his face, only to let him drop back into the dust again.

"Mostly yonder," Sleepy told him, nodding his head toward the north. "Spud Crisp an' some of 'em's got what's left o' Red's men holed up in Black's house."

"How many?"

"Dunno. Four, five, mebbe."

"Round up the rest an' start back," Jim ordered curtly. "We'll catch up."

"One feller got away," Sleepy reported. "Headed hell-fer-leather west."

Jim swore softly. That meant that Black would be warned, and in revenge would attack Sandy, Happy Valley's cowtown metropolis, *possibly before morning*. It was already past midnight—if they started back now they might have time to "dig in" before Black arrived.

The cowboy broke into a limping run for Jans' house at the northern edge of the town, yet apart from it. The dying flames of the burning Stronghold lit up one side of the house but the rest was in somber shadow. He dropped to his knees, started crawling.

All the shooting was now ahead of him. He circled the dark house which

hid the last of Jans' bandits, and eased back to where Spud was raking a rear window.

"How's chances?" Jim asked.

"Middlin'," returned Spud.

"Ease off then. I'm goin' in. Call off the boys an' get set tuh ride in a hell of a hurry."

"Shucks, Jim, I'll go in with you."

Jim shook his head. "Give me ten minutes, Spud. Then ride, er Black'll get tuh Sandy first. Git!"

THE rear door was locked. Jim, pressed for time, ripped out the jagged glass in the window, crawled through, heedless of the noise he made. Sounds of steady shooting and the acrid smell of powder smoke tooled him along to the front of the house.

He stumbled over a crumpled form, cursed, felt for a door. He found it and went through, crouching low. Two men were there, but the light was so dim Jim could just make them out as they pumped return shots through the riddled windows, or spoke.

"Reach high!" he shouted suddenly, leaping aside.

Startled oaths, stabbing flashes, roars of six-guns, whine and thud of bullets, his own belching Colts, the sting of seared flesh, breathless dodging, plunk of falling bodies, silence.

He clambered through a window, yelling for Spud. An answering shout, then they were tearing through the night, leaving death and ruins behind them.

"Those o' yuh who can't make it tuh Sandy, turn off tuh the Bar-K," ordered Jim, when they had overtaken Sleepy and the wounded. "Another fight's ahead, boys. We ain't done with Jans yet."

"Hell, Jim, we're all ridin' with yuh," returned a puncher with a deep wound in his shoulder. "Our tails ain't between our legs yet."

"Yores never would be, Pink," grinned Jim. "But yuh only got one flipper, hombre, an' Jans is plumb poison at best. When he learns we got Red he's goin' hog-wild."

"Damn right," added another rider whose scorched shirt failed to hide his blistered back. "An' let me tell yuh, Pink, when yuh meets up with that skunk, don't yuh give him no even break. They ain't no such thing with that fella."

IT was still two hours before sunup when some fifteen of the original forty men rode into Sandy. Most of them were wounded but still able to fight. Jim, however, wasn't thinking of his own punctures, but of the wounded and the dead he had left at the Bar-K, thankful that Olive Wilks, quick, resourceful, fearless, was there to help Doc Saunders to care for them.

News of their return brought every able-bodied man in town on a run for the jail, center of interest. A guard was posted about the building now housing the redoubtable Red. Riders raced away to watch for Jans and his outlaws. Others broke into the general store—the owner had been killed at the Stronghold—in search for additional ammunition.

Jake Dorn, owner of the Cross X Ranch, delegated himself as Jim's lieutenant and policed the town in the absence of a regular deputy. Jim appropriated Wilks' office in the jail for his headquarters, and there Dorn found him a bit later.

"Trouble, shore's whiskers on a last year's egg," he reported grimly, a deep frown between his narrowed eyes. "Ain't a damn cartridge left in the store, Jim. What'n hell we goin' tuh do? The boys is plumb nigh naked, their belts is so damn empty. Me, I ain't a idee."

"Find Keno, Jud Green, Windy an' Ace," snapped Jim. "Send 'em here *pronto*. They's other ways—" He left the sentence unfinished as Dorn bolted for the door, slamming it behind him.

Jim yelled for one of the guards.

"Whatever happens, keep yore eye on Red," he ordered. "He's slippery as greased lightnin'. I'm reservin' his killing till later, though," he added bitterly. "He needs killin' a thousand times over."

"Fer gosh sakes, Jim, what yuh bring him back for, anyway?"

"Bait for Black. Jans won't know about our bein' back, see? And he'll come roarin' in here thinkin' tuh shoot up the place, release Red, and ride away again, thumbin' his nose at us. We're goin' tuh show him we're plumb glad he's come. Savvy?" He looked up as the four he had sent for entered the office.

"Ammunition's all gone, fellas," he told them coolly. "All our Colt-fodder's in our belts. Spread the word when yuh leave for the rest not tuh get reckless with

what they got left. Now, here's my idea."

Swiftly, in clipped sentences, he outlined his changed plans for defense. A plan which first brought consternation, then broad grins to the troubled faces before him.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Windy, admiringly. "That's shore a humdinger! Hope Black humps hisself tuh git here 'fore daylight!"

"Scatter," Jim ordered, "or he'll be here 'fore we're ready for him."

"But, Jim—" Jud Green spat expertly at a knothole in the floor—"some o' the folks is honin' tuh string Red up 'fore Black gits here. What say?"

"Tell 'em tuh get busy *pronto* on what I just told yuh, an' they won't have time tuh worry about Red not gettin' what's comin' tuh him." Then as footsteps were heard at the front door, "See who's comin', Keno."

WHEN Keno turned, the door opened, and Olive Wilks walked in. Behind her a rider stuck his head in the door and shouted, "Black hellions er poundin' hell-fer-leather 'bout four mile out! Get set!"

"Scatter, boys!" Jim roared, following them to the door. "Guard!" he called. "One man tuh each room! The rest wait here in the hall for me!" He turned to Olive as she leaned against the desk, slowly stripping off her gloves, frankly worried. "Yuh shouldn't have come, Ollie," he began, troubled, but she interrupted him hotly.

"Don't tell me what I shouldn't have done, Jim Gorse!" she flared. "Sandy's my home. My father's sheriff. These people are my friends. D'you think I'm an ostrich to hide my head in the sand when—" She broke off. "Forget I'm here, Jim. Go ahead—Jans'll be here in a few minutes."

Jim nodded grimly. "Stay in here," he commanded gruffly, "an' keep out o' range o' bullets!" He strode to the door, stepped out, closed it behind him. "Aw right, fellas, come on!" He darted for the storeroom where Wilks always kept a full supply of pitch-pine knots. "Grab all yuh can carry an' get up top!" he snapped. "An' no shootin' 'thout orders!"

Catching up a can of coal-oil he raced for the flat, parapeted roof. As he crawled through the trapdoor, shouts and the mingled sounds of hurried preparation reached him.

"Down flat, boys. Remember, keep out o' sight till I give the word. Ace, slide down an' bring up the rest o' them knots. An' let's have more matches."

To aid in quick ignition, Jim sprinkled the wood with oil, saw that it was handy for instant use. Then, having nothing to do but wait, he gave three short, piercing whistles. From every housetop where it was possible for man or woman to perch, came answering signals.

"Ain't no more knots, Jim," announced Ace, flopping down behind the front coping. "Let 'em come. They's torches here 'nuff for an army."

"They're comin'," returned Jim. "Hear 'em?"

Faint, but growing rapidly in volume, came the thuds of racing hoofs, the hoarse yells of lust-driven men, shouted commands. Jim leaned over the parapet listening. The darkness of early morning effectually screened the oncomers from view.

"Get set, boys!" he barked. "They're close! And s' help me, this'll be Black Jans' last night on earth!" he promised himself, grimly. He'd pay, pay for his father's death, and pay for the deaths of every man, woman and child chalked up against the whole outlaw crew.

Thundering into Main Street came a compact mass of hard-pressed horses, their riders firing pointblank at the buildings on either side as they swept uproariously toward the jail.

"RED! Red! Red!" The name rose crashingly above the thunder of their guns.

But there was not an answering shot. Instead, discarded tomato cans filled with coal-oil, kerosene-soaked rags and twists of cotton, sailed from the housetops into their ranks. Oil splashed over riders and horses indiscriminately. The cavalcade slowed down to cope with this totally unexpected counter-attack, hats threshing wildly at the rain of missiles.

"At 'em, damn yuh!" bawled Jans, viciously spitting out a mouthful of kerosene splashed in his face. "Get intuh them shacks 'fore they set yuh afire!"

Jim sprang to his feet at the sound of that voice. Six-gun ready, heedless of personal safety, he probed into that shadowy tangle of raging renegades, but the

gloom hid Jans from sight. He couldn't tell one man from another down there. Though the racket was almost deafening, he could still hear Black's bullying roar.

But the desperadoes, trying to dodge the sharp-edged tins and oily deluge, backed slowly toward the jail, fighting panicky broncs, shooting wildly as they came. Some of the horses, wild with terror, took the bits in their teeth and plunged down alleys.

"Look out behind!" Jim's stentorian tones belled out over the rooftops. "Give it to 'em!"

Like short-arc rockets, balls of flame rose, fell, died out at the rear. Consternation seized those in front, now converging on the jail. Hate-hardened faces lifted as Jim's voice rang through the din. A shower of bullets sang viciously past him, but plunging broncs interfered with effective shooting.

"That's Gorse!" yelled a voice. "Kill the damn coyote! Let's string him up!"

Another blast of slugs tore harmlessly over the jail. Keno, at Jim's left, growled protestingly but uselessly. And still no answering shots, no balls of flame to light up the scene. Only bedlam.

Jim waited no longer.

"All right, boys—light up—*now!*"

Over the low parapet into the yelling, shooting, oil-smeared riders dropped two-score blazing pine knots. Instantly tongues of flame licked hungrily at both horses and men, everywhere a bit of oil had settled. Shrieks and curses of burning outlaws and screams of frantic broncs filled the early morning. Stark terror gripped men and animals alike. It was a fiery retribution, swift, inescapable.

Forgetting the man they had come to set free, beating desperately at the flames engulfing them, the outlaws lowered their heads and dug in the spurs. Any direction, so long as it led to sand or water before they burned to cinders, any place away from that stifling, seething inferno—

But turn as they would, grim-faced men and equally determined women met them with a decimating cross-fire of bullets. A half-dozen bolted for the alleys on either side of the jail. It was like running into a furnace, as those on top pelted them with blazing brands. One man backed his horse against the wall opposite and deliberately let loose both his Colts at the men above, only to be riddled in return.

The rank smell of coal-oil, burning cloth and seared flesh mingled with the groans of tortured men, snarled curses, crackling six-guns. Riders and mounts began to pile up in a ghastly heap. Their pay had been long in coming.

"Knots er all gone, Jim!" shouted Ace.

"All right." Jim was still looking for the outlaw leader. "Down the ladder at the back. Watch yore step! We'll clean up—an' if yuh see Black—"

"Oh, Jim, did he get away?"

Jim whirled, dumfounded, wrathy.

"Ollie!" he stormed. "What you up here for? This ain't no place for you."

"Oh, Jim, I forgot! Red got loose—picked the lock, or something—he's killed two of the guard."

"What?" Jim whirled, shouting, "Hey, boys! Downstairs! Quick! Red's loose!"

THE men began to pile over the edge, dropping from the sill to the ground twelve feet below.

"Stay here!" he shouted to Ollie. Wrenching the hatch open, he dropped halfway through.

A burning brand curling upward, plopped with a shower of sparks close at hand. Jim grabbed for it, missed, scrambled back, kicked out the blaze, cursing softly to himself. Too much oil smeared around. And with Ollie up there—

With another wrathful kick at the dead brand he turned back toward the trap, stared straight into the face of a newcomer.

"Red!" The name ripped from him. Even in the uncertain light, Jim recognized that carroty head. His hand jumped toward his holster, stopped. Ollie stood directly beyond the outlaw!

Red's hand flashed up, six-gun roaring. Jim, equally fast, dropped to one knee. Jans' bullet tore through his sleeve, stinging the flesh. Flames poured from the open tip of Jim's holster. No time to draw when split seconds counted. Red gave a gurgling cry, toppled backward out of sight into the blackness of the room below.

Bleak-faced, Jim kicked the trap shut. One Jans gone. Now for the other. Swiftly he ejected the shells from his Colt, felt for more in his belt. He found none, so

he rammed the empty gun back, and ran for the ladder at the rear.

"Jim! Oh, Jim! You hurt?"

Jim stopped in mid-stride, spun on one heel. Ollie faced him, white as a ghost.

"Only a nick," he answered hurriedly. "Watch the hatch, will yuh? I gotta find Black. He's—"

A yell, inhuman in its ferocity, punctuated with shots and the crash of a broken window, interrupted him. Feet came pounding up the ladder.

"That's Black," hissed Jim. "Get down in the shadow there an' don't move! Quick!"

He forced her close to the coping, then sprinted noiselessly back, six-gun out.

Morning was breaking. In the gray light he saw a hand appear over the edge. Then a face showed up, a face distorted with insane fury. Jim flung his empty weapon at it, hard. Jans saw it coming and twisted his head to one side, but the gunsight tore an ugly gash in his forehead as it whipped past.

Black shook his head, smeared blood over his face with a hairy arm, and flung himself onto the roof. Before he could straighten up or draw his gun, Jim was on him. His right arm circled Black's neck like a vise, his left clawed for the still holstered Colt.

With a choked snarl, Black doubled up, throwing Jim over his head, breaking his hold. Jim twisted in air, came down on his toes and spread fingers. Jans' right streaked for his gun. Jim dived, caught his legs, upsetting him. Black struck at him, but Jim ducked, burying his head in Black's stomach, bringing an explosive grunt. For one precious second Black's hold on the gun relaxed. Jim hit at it, sent it slithering across the roof.

Stepping back, Jim crashed his right fist into Jans' unprotected face. Raging, Black lunged, his huge arms flailing, and landed a terrific wallop to Jim's left shoulder, paralyzing his whole arm.

Sensing his advantage, Black bored in. His hamlike left sledge-hammered a blow just above Jim's cartridge belt, doubling him up with pain. Sick, Jim backed away, stumbled over the trap door, crashed flat. He heard scurrying feet, a dull thud.

"Yuh damn hellion, I'll git yuh fer that!" Black yelled suddenly.

Pain forgotten, Jim jerked to his feet, let out a yell.

Dancing lightly across the roof, the dead firebrand in her hand, Olive Wilks was drawing the outlaw leader away from Jim. A broad smutty streak across Black's face told where one blow had landed. She evaded a clumsy rush, smearing him again and again with the charred stick. Circling closer to the coping, Jans spied his six-gun and dived for it.

Jim took a running jump, struck Jans broadside, knocked him over just as his fingers closed on the gun. Jim kicked it out of his hand, sent it flying into space. With a feline twist, Black curled up, got his powerful arms about Jim's knees and pulled. Jim crashed to his back, breath knocked from him.

Jans, keeping one arm clamped about Jim's knees, swept the other upward, dug steely fingers into each side of Jim's throat. Blood pounded in Jim's ears, multi-colored lights began dancing before his eyes. He tried to straighten, but couldn't.

"Think yuh're goin' tuh end it, do yuh?" snarled Jans. "How'd yuh like that?"

DESPERATELY Jim tore at the fingers clamped about his neck. Breath rasped chokingly through his constricted throat. He wrenched and clawed frantically at those vise-like fingers. Things began to go black. He relaxed suddenly and Jans loosened his grip. Jim gulped in a lungful of air, twisted to one side and broke away as Black lunged for another death-grip on his throat.

Rolling, Jim got his feet under him, snapped erect. Jans reeled to his feet. Again the outlaw bored in, blowing away blood at every labored breath, whimpering with eagerness to kill. Jim stepped back toward the coping, recovered, drove forward and struck, struck again and again. He backed each blow with every ounce of strength he could command, aiming for the heart.

Black staggered, striking out desperately, seeking for a strangle-hold. Jim hammered him back mercilessly.

With a wild bellow, Jans drew down his chin, plowed in with huge fists flailing. Jim bent his knees, his hands slipped under Black's guard, his fingers closing about the bull-like neck, closed, and hung on. He wedged his head between his gripping hold and Jans' chin, saving his own neck, adding power to his fingers.

Jans bearlike arms snapped about Jim's waist, and began to squeeze crushingly. Jim could feel Black's heart thudding against his own chest. But he never let go. Floundering over the roof, they crashed against the coping, slid to the floor, Jim on top. Straining, gasping for air, Jans struggled to break that hold. Death was in it and he knew it.

Jim's knees inched forward. His arms shoved upward. Sweat poured from him. His neck began to ache. Breath wheezed through his distended nostrils. But inch by inch he forced back Jans' head, up, over the edge of the parapet.

He had Jans where he wanted him, now. With a quick jerk he lifted his head, freed one hand to slip behind Black's neck, pressing down, down—

There was a dull snap—

FEET pounded over the roof.

"Fer gosh sakes!" Spud Crisp's excited voice reached Jim as through a haze. "What's goin' on up here? Snap out of it, Jim. Hey, let loose! Want tuh *grow* tuh that bozo? He's dead; dead as a polecat. Let loose, guy."

Slowly Jim released his hold, came to his feet.

"Get 'em—all?" he croaked.

"An' gosh, what a clean-up!" nodded Spud, grinning.

"Aw right. Take charge below till I get down. Be there in a minute. An' close the hatch after yuh."

With a whoop of triumph Spud dropped through the trap-door, closing it with a bang. Jim walked over to where Olive sat on the coping, her face in her shaking hands.

"Ollie," he began falteringly.

"Oh, Jim, I was so afraid he'd kill you!" Trembling she faced him, a glad light in her eyes.

"He prob'ly would have," agreed Jim simply, "if yuh hadn't took that stick tuh him. So yuh see, yuh saved a life, Ollie. My life. And it's yores, girl, if yuh'll have it—me with it, o' course. Will yuh, Ollie?"

"Silly! You've always belonged to me. Didn't you know it? Oh, Jim, I'm so glad, so glad. And we're both so dirty—"

"Yeah," grinned Jim. "Shore am. An' this roof *is* kinda public—"

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THE TRAIL RIDERS' ROUND-UP

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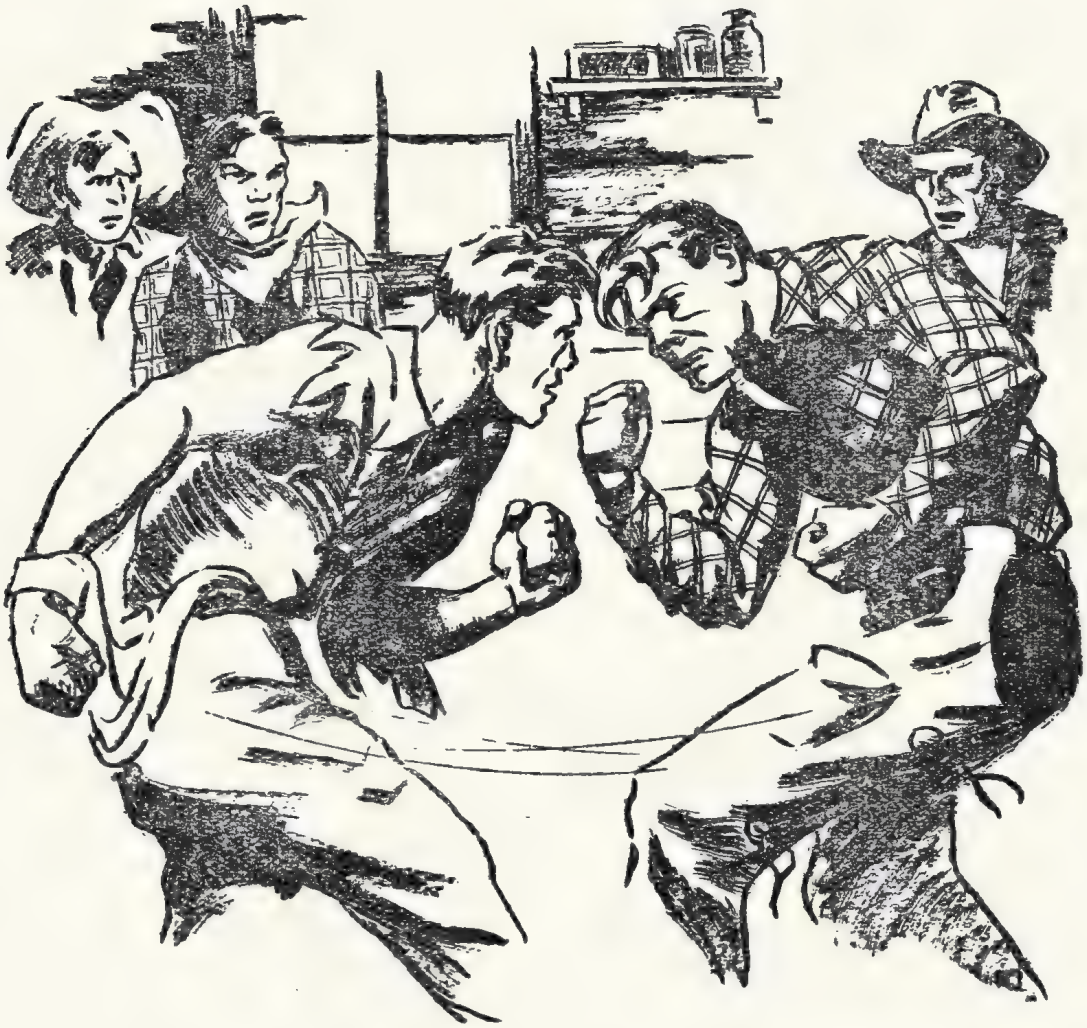


Foreman Trouble

By LAWRENCE A. KEATING

TROUBLE, brewing on the Bar G Circle since the moment Joe Graham departed to visit a friend who was desperately ill in Chicago, broke out with suddenness and decision on the fourth morning of Ben Caswell's rule.

Joe was his own foreman, superintendent, and all the officers of his cattle company owning the spread, but it had been rumored about the bunkhouse for some time that he meant to appoint a range foreman to shoulder some of the growing responsibility.

Most of the cow-waddies figured Gus Grell for the job inasmuch as Grell had been longest in the Bar G Circle employ and knew stock as he knew the back of his hand. Only quick-moving, slow-talking Ike Preston, veteran of thirty years' range work from Calgary to Mexico, calculated that Grell wouldn't be chosen—and Ike was right.

When the boss announced his departure for Chicago he added simply that young Ben Caswell would be acting foreman, and so "yuh boys just hark to Ben for a spell till I get back."

It was a bitter draught for Gus Grell, for one of his first authoritative acts would have been to fire Ben. "Pickin' out a guy that's under suspicion for the Littleton Bank job!" he growled sourly.

"He ain't under suspicion, Gus," re-

minded Tex Fernvale, desirous of being fair. "Sheriff Munn didn't have nothin' on Ben except that he was seen near the bank right after the job. Didn't find any loot, and couldn't make him come out with a confession. Besides, Joe Graham convinced the sheriff Caswell wasn't that kind."

The other grunted, kicked at a tuft of bunchgrass, and strode away. Caswell and Grell didn't get along, had never hit it off since the twenty-two-year-old puncher joined the Bar G Circle a year ago. Ben was kiddish looking, with freckles spraying a good-natured face that never became very dark even under the prairie sun. He had a turned-up nose, a wide grin, and he was invariably cheerful.

Gus Grell was moody, of medium height, possessing a pair of shoulders that could push over a Brahma. He was irritable and jealous—the bully type exactly. As soon as Joe Graham was gone, Gus began to make trouble. His sullenness doubled; he became mean and covertly rebellious. His eyes mirrored the man's hate so that Ben scarcely needed Ike Preston's warning. "Look out for that hombre, youngster. He's shore riled 'cause yuh got the job. Reckon he'll try to ruin yuh with the old man."

Caswell shrugged his shoulders. Narrowly, but with casual air, he did look out for Grell, and for cowardly Snipe Daly, who fawned on his master like a yellow cur.

ON the fourth morning of his new authority the young acting foreman returned to the ranch buildings from an early errand to a nearby spread. Sighting the cloud of acrid dust that billowed and eddied from the cattle pens, he knew the boys were branding again. Ben slowed his horse, swung to earth, and tied reins around the juniper bars. He climbed to the topmost rail and sat a moment watching.

The Bar G Circle had calves enough this year, what with Joe Graham's purchase of Chain T stock, to keep the comparatively small force of waddies busy two long days. Below him, emerging like wraiths from the stinging dust, two ropers worked busily. Half a dozen irons lay in the fire. Four were in use as Ben watched.

Suddenly his lips pursed—which was a bad sign with Ben. He scrambled inside the stock pen and went directly to the spot where Gus Grell stood. Caswell said nothing as he knelt beside a motionless Hereford calf and briefly examined it. But when he rose to full height again his blue eyes snapped with anger.

"Grell, I warned yuh not to get too strong with these calves! Killed one yesterday by throwin' its backbone out, an' yuh've done the same thing again. Shucks," he exclaimed ruefully, staring at the lifeless animal at his feet. "Joe ain't goin' to like havin' his beef killed before it's growed."

The bully of the Bar G Circle cast a malevolent glance at his young boss. He too straightened, hands on his beefy hips. "Accident, that's all," he grunted shortly. "Bound to happen sometimes."

They exchanged looks. "It's no accident when yuh grab his neck with one hand, get yore other arm around his middle, an' bend a calf into a V. Nobody else here kills stock durin' brandin', Grell."

Gus stiffened and his hard eyes narrowed. "Yuh mean I did it a-purpose?" he challenged.

Ben held the man's gaze, then motioned to Ike Preston. "Take this to Sing Lah, will yuh, Ike? Reckon Sing can make use o' the carcass."

"I asked if yuh mean I killed that critter a-purpose?"

Ben kept his stance as the older man's bulk came closer in threatening accusation. Cool and determined, he spat out the last of his plug, fumbled in a rear pocket of his overall pants, and produced fresh tobacco. When part of this was in motion in one cheek he nodded slowly. "Reckon yuh savvy about right, Grell."

THE four or five men nearby suspended work. Obviously it was to be a showdown—and a risky one for the acting foreman. Gus Grell was thirty pounds heavier; he was surprisingly fast on his feet and clever with his blows. An unprincipled fighter, he would seize any opening and make the most of it. Nobody had seen Ben Caswell in a scrap, but the chances were against his being the bully's equal.

A low rumble emanating from Grell's deep chest burst from his puffy lips like the roar of an angry bull. "Ain't no crooked bank buster gonna call me

names an' get away with 'em! Time somebody took yuh down a peg, anyhow," he snorted with mounting wrath, "an' I got a good mind to do it!"

Blood surged faster through Ben's veins at the unfounded epithet, and he felt sudden longing to smash the fellow's brutal, ape-like face. For an instant he considered firing Grell on the spot; but he discarded that notion, for while Gus and Snipe Daly were leading trouble makers, there were others to be shown who was boss. And, short-handed already, the Bar G Circle could ill afford to lose a single waddy.

"I suggest," Ben stated in an icy tone, "that yuh get back to work. An' don't handle them calves so rough after this, savvy?"

He turned on his heel. "Look out!" yelled Ike Preston.

Ben whipped around. A crashing maul-like fist threatened to rip an ear from his head. Slightly dazed, the youth crouched and sidestepped. A thick form hurtled past, and Caswell's outflung boot took Gus Grell in the shin. He plunged face first into the dust of the cattle pen, and only stopped sliding six inches from the fire.

But instead of settling the matter, this made things worse. Gus scrambled to his feet spitting dust and curses. He made one dive for his holstered .45, but paused.

"Hands off that shooter!"

GROWLING awful threats, the man tensed as young Caswell approached, his own six-gun covering his rival, eyes watching with hawk-like exactitude. He gripped Grell's weapon by the butt, lifted and tossed it to Ike Preston. "Take mine, too. Reckon we can settle this some other way."

The bully caught Snipe Daly's look and felt that when gunplay was needed, Snipe would supply it. Gus gloated inwardly as his cruel gaze traveled over Ben's hundred-and-seventy-pound frame, lithe and powerful, but not powerful enough. Then, hoping to catch this squirt of a foreman napping, Grell charged.

The struggle was swift and brief. Fists smacked on flesh; two bodies surged back and forth; grunts, ejaculations, and quick-sucked gasps reached the tense watchers on the pen bars. When the dust cleared somewhat young Ben Caswell lay prone, staring skyward. Grell, with contemptuous imprecations, awaited his rise.

IKE PRESTON'S worried survey found his companions divided as to sympathy. Fernvale had always been friendly to Ben; there was no jealousy in his nature. But Snipe Daly was Grell's shadow, had Grell's jealousy of Ben's new power. Husing and Jones were doubtful — leaned toward whoever should win this fight.

As Preston was about to spring down from his perch to aid Ben, the youth crawled painfully to his feet. The lower half of his face was bloody from his spurting nose. He had a dark bruise under one eye and all told, looked much the worse for wear. But the kid was game; he sprang suddenly erect and sent a well-aimed blow at Grell's jaw. Crack! Gus' head tilted sharply as knuckles sounded on bone. The powerful ranny tottered on his heels and staggered backward.

But Caswell hadn't the force to put Gus out. With a ferocity that was astounding, with his beet-red countenance contorted in jealousy and hate, Gus charged.

Flailing fists were met with good guarding, but slammed home nevertheless. Finally, with a left-hand feint and a short, bone-crushing right uppercut, Grell triumphed. Ben Caswell's knees gave way. His usually cheerful face went pale and absolutely blank. Air burst from his lungs and he sprawled like an upset turtle, threshed feebly—then lay still.

"Stop, or I'll drill yuh!"

Ike Preston had seen a good many men like Gus Grell, and he knew that once fully aroused their small minds worked to murder pitch at sight of a man down. His knife-like challenge made Grell pause. One spurred boot was lifted to crush in the face of the prostrate man. Animal ferocity flamed in that brute countenance—lust, in which reason was drowned like a kitten in a watering trough.

Snipe Daly found himself between Ike and Grell; he had no chance to draw even had he possessed the courage to face a hipshooter like Preston. Gus Grell hesitated, then snarling curses at

empty air, slowly replaced his foot on the ground. "Git back!" was the veteran puncher's next command.

BY now the other men had recovered their wits. Swarming down from the fence, they surrounded Gus while Ike went to Ben Caswell, holstered his gun, and wrapped long, muscular arms around the kid. He had lifted Ben from the ground when the acting foreman came to.

"I—I'm all—right," he muttered thickly. Ike put him down, mopped blood from his mouth and chin with a fresh bandana, and worked the youth's arms and legs to freshen circulation. In another minute Ben staggered to his feet, groggy but in command of his faculties. He had taken a terrific beating, but the bitterness of his thoughts was double the pain of his body.

A glance around the staring circle of faces told Caswell that defeat had been costly. Among these men who could whip all comers he was the man in command. It was the law of the wolf pack transferred to the range, and lacking the physique to maul Gus Grell, the youth's troubles were going to be vastly increased from this instant.

He knew from his aching stomach that a boot had been planted there. The heavy darting pains from his abdomen told Ben that he had been kneed.

It was on the tip of his tongue to lodge protest, but fortunately he checked himself. Whining would not aid him; what these rannihans wanted was a boss in blows as well as in name. They watched now as if half expecting Ben to yield the acting foremanship to his conqueror—a thing he could not, would not do, if he were flayed alive!

THE youth's jaw set and his single good eye took on unmistakable determination. In the taut silence he recognized his need for masterful handling, but seemed able to think of no way to control the situation. Again he considered firing Grell—which meant Snipe Daly, too—but again discarded the notion. It wouldn't raise his status with Fernvale, Husing, or Jones. But if Ben Caswell wanted to continue as acting foreman he needed to exert authority right now in decisive terms.

Ben brushed himself off, rescued his sombrero, and jammed it on his sandy head. "All right, boys—back to work. Grell, yuh better ride out to North Valley an' tell Hank Green I want him. Stay with the herd in Hank's place."

The men exchanged looks of amazement. The bully's jaw dropped; a sneer flashed over his beefy countenance and he parted swollen lips to speak. But something stayed Grell, some inner voice. He merely issued a contemptuous grunt, spun on his heel, and headed for the juniper bars. A moment later his calico pony scudded away, the men returned to branding calves, while Caswell went to the bunkhouse to wash and attend his hurts.

AFTER a few minutes' work in total silence, gossip arose as to whether young Ben was fit to hold the responsibility Joe Graham had conferred on him.

"Shucks!" exclaimed Snipe Daly as he poked an iron into the fire. "A guy that can't hold his job with his fists ain't got no business orderin' me around!"

Runt Jones shot tobacco juice into the embers and glanced at Daly. "For once yo're almost headed for bein' correct."

"Yeah," chimed in Fernvale, a man of twenty-eight, "the kid's all right in his way. But he's shore gonna get rode hard from now on. Gus is gonna make plenty trouble—more'n he ever has—or I'm a shoestring's grampa."

WHEN he had bathed and closed his cuts with adhesive tape, Caswell went to the cook shanty to give Sing Lah orders regarding the second dead calf within two days. About to turn away, he felt the yellow man's hand on his arm.

"Me catchem fight—plenty bad!" Sing Lah informed him earnestly, and not at all in derision. He stared at Ben's blackened eye, frowned, and shook his head. "Him Grell one tough son-of-a-biscuit, you bet! Plenty bad fighter, no? Kickem, punchem belly, no?"

Ben summoned a rueful grin and nodded. "Between you and me, Sing, he shore don't follow the Marquis of Whosis rules. Reckon he'd just as soon knife a guy that was down.

"But I'm stickin' to my job," he vowed, and smashed one fist into his other palm for emphasis. "Joe Graham helped me

out've the bank hold-up mess because there wasn't any proof, and he believed in me. I'm goin' to run this spread accordin' to Joe's orders an' prove myself to him. No Gus Grell's rulin' this roost, Sing—and don't you forget that, either!"

The Chinaman grinned toothlessly. "You fightem Grell like he fightem you. Catchem plenty hurt you listen Chink way!"

The upshot was that Caswell listened and felt his interest mounting as Sing Lah explained. The next half hour passed quickly, so that by the time Ben rode to North Valley Gus Grell had told his story with suitable variation and managed to stir up dissension among the riders there.

"Hell!" snapped Bart McDow. "He's only a kid, and if he can't enforce orders he ain't the guy to give 'em. Notice how Joe Graham runs this here cow farm? With his two big fists an' a damned quick six-gun!"

"Joe oughtn't to've made Ben actin' foreman," was Hank Green's view. "I ain't sayin' whether I think Caswell was guilty or not about them Littleton Bank bonds. But a guy under suspicion, 'specially when he ain't able to boss like he should, ain't got no right bein' foreman, just like Gus says."

One casual survey showed Ben Caswell how the men felt. He had lost invaluable prestige when he had lost that fight. The law of might counted, and Grell's job of punishing was thorough and definite as the youth's closed eye, battered nose, and face attested. Ben was faced with smoldering rebellion. An order they didn't like and led by the two-hundred-pound bully, the nine Bar G Circle riders might actually strike—or all save Ike Preston.

SITTING at the head of the board table during supper that night Ben felt distinctly ill at ease. He could not keep the talk in ordinary, careless channels. Every so often quiet reigned, during which came covert, skeptical stares, and from Grell and Snipe Daly, outright contemptuous glances.

A foreman who could not enforce his authority didn't deserve to have it—that was the meaning of every look, the gist of every conversation during the next two days. But Caswell went about his business, tactful and diplomatic with the bully, yet budging not one inch when it came to assigning Grell to work Joe Graham would have assigned him.

So discouraging did the situation become that only two things kept Ben from wiring his resignation to Graham and leaving for new fields. One was that he never acknowledged defeat without a long, hard fight. The other was allied with gratitude.

Ben's presence near the Littleton Bank the night Ase Monroe had been slugged while working over monthly statements, was due to pure chance. A pair of rascals the old man could not describe got away with three hundred dollars cash and seven thousand in bonds. Three citizens, including Sheriff Munn, had seen Caswell emerge from the shadow near the bank about the time the job was done, and he constituted the only suspect.

Investigation proved nothing, but some persons still looked askance at Ben. He owed a great deal to Joe Graham for defending him. "Say, that boy's straight as a ruler!" the cattleman vowed. Now, to prove his faith, he trusted Ben with the ranch.

Thinking of this, and of his natural ambition to make good as a range boss, the youth determined to stay. But things were growing worse, and it took but half an eye to see that Gus Grell was winning every hand to dissatisfaction and contempt. Work was done in a haphazard, slovenly manner. Once Caswell, riding to the North Valley herd, found in amazement that not a single Bar G Circle man was there!

He demanded of Sam Husing why he had not been on the job. The fellow lifted eyebrows in surprise. "Gus said on account o' them steep rock sides the cows couldn't get far anyhow, and didn't need watchin'. So I thought—"

"Grell told yuh?" snapped Caswell angrily. "What's that got to do with it? Look here, Husing: I'll stand no nonsense from the likes of you! Get on yore hoss an' get out there—and *stay*. Gus Grell's got nothing to say; *I'm* boss here as yuh know very well!"

The puncher climbed astride his mustang. "The hell I know it!" he muttered under his breath—and made off.

BEN stared at the waddy's departing back. The supreme daring of Grell, the man's confident influence among the

hands, was amazing. Anger gripped Ben and he felt an impulse to seek out Gus and call him to account. But realization followed that it would lead to a fight. And the cold hard fact was that another defeat would ruin him entirely, take away any possible chance to keep on as Joe Graham's representative.

Nor could he fire Grell any more than before. Every man save possibly Preston would quit with Gus—and during the last two days Ben thought he had detected slight disappointment in the eyes of his only supporter, as if even Ike were losing faith.

JOE GRAHAM had been gone a week when one evening shortly after eight o'clock Grell stomped into the ranch house office where Ben was working over the six hundred dollars cash he had drawn from the bank for the payroll. "Say," the thick-set bully opened in a truculent tone, "that silver-mounted quirt I won at the Cheyenne rodeo's been stolen."

His words seemed to carry accusation and Ben looked up. He said nothing for an instant but his brain whirled with thoughts. "Sorry it's gone," he stated curtly. "But yuh'll have to look for it yoreself. I've got no time to go hunting quirts, as yuh know very well."

Grell assumed a caustic leer. "We found it."

"Yuh found it?" Ben's face mirrored surprise and irritation as he got out of his chair. "Then why come botherin' me about it bein' stole?"

"'Cause," snapped the bully, and planted his feet wide apart while he eyed his man, "we found an empty envelope with the quirt, marked 'Littleton State Bank,' and the whole business was in the beddin' of yore bunk!"

Ben Caswell began to frown puzzledly, then stiffened as if struck. He took a step toward his accuser. "Yuh lie, yuh good for nothin' trouble-maker! I had nothin' to do with yore quirt. And as to the bank bonds, I—" He stopped. Suddenly both men went for their guns.

"Draw an' yo're a dead man!"

Grell's weapon flashed into his hand while Ben's was still in its holster. With teeth clenched in rage, Caswell loosed his .45. He was about to speak when Grell called over his shoulder. "Come in, boys." And to the prisoner's utter astonishment, through the open door trooped Snipe Daly, Fernvale, Green, Jones, and Husing, all with faces grim and determined.

"Say!" breathed Ben. "What's the meaning o' this? Yuh get back to work, the lot of yuh, or I'll—"

"Yuh'll do nothin', Caswell," Runt Jones cut in sharply. "We've had enough o' yore managin' the spread and we're agreed that Joe Graham's going to find things in tiptop shape when he gets back. Which means, he ain't goin' to find yuh here at all!"

Ben's jaw sagged at this boldness—engineered, as was plainly evident, by Grell. Before he could speak Sam Husing turned to the ringleader. "Gus, somebody oughta ride for the sheriff. It's our duty to hand this guy over so's Munn can clear up the bank job. Besides, we don't want him around here any more."

Again the prisoner's countenance showed astonishment, quickly changing to greater wrath. "Get out of here, the lot of yuh!" he snapped threateningly. "Go on—*vamose!*"

Their reply came in growls of derision. "We'll get out, all right," promised Snipe Daly, making sure that he was not in the line of fire between his chief and Caswell. "But first off we're gettin' rid of yuh, yuh lousy foreman! Jones is right, Gus: we oughta hand 'im over to Sheriff Munn."

"Shore thing," agreed Fernvale. "Jim can clear up the bank job in short order when he puts the screws on Caswell."

The prisoner's eye narrowed. When he spoke it was in a placating tone that deceived his captors. "Boys, yuh know I wouldn't tackle any bank, that I'm not the robbin' kind. As far as the Bar G Circle goes, all I want is to see things run right. So what do yuh say—"

He interrupted himself to spring at Grell. One well aimed blow sent the bully's six-gun hurtling against the wall. In a flash Ben's own weapon came into his fist, its black muzzle swaying around the circle of startled faces.

"Up with yore hands, everybody! Fernvale, drop yore gun on the floor. Get Husing's, and toss it here in front o' me. Now get Jones' an' Snipe's. Careful, or yuh'll never see breakfast!"

Imprecations and oaths snarled at him did not so much as move a muscle in the youth's set face. "Get back along the

wall, all of yuh!" he ordered next, and made his way toward the desk and safe that stood in one corner. "Hands high, now, and don't so much as blink!"

THOROUGHLY convinced of his grim desperation, not a man offered resistance beyond threats of vengeance. Ben Caswell paid no heed; he scooped the six hundred dollars in cash from Joe Graham's desk. And while his gun continued slowly to wave in a commanding semi-circle, he stuffed the money into the square black safe without looking at it. "Careful!" he kept warning them. "Yuh know how tough bank robbers are!"

So intent was the acting foreman upon keeping mastery that he forgot Graham's instructions about locking the safe. An old-fashioned iron affair, its lock and hinges would offer little difficulty to an experienced cracksman. Above the dial a hand lever was fixed, making it possible to latch the door before spinning the dial for complete locking.

Ben, who had never examined a safe until Graham showed him this one, forgot one requisite. He shoved the door to with a heave of his foot. Then he stooped and grasped the lever. He heard a click as the latch snapped, and straightening, backed to the doorway of the ranch office.

"Yo're gettin' in a lot o' trouble, forcin' me off this spread with a cheap excuse like findin' that envelope and quirt," he warned the men held at bay by his vigilant .45. "Better think twice, Husing—you, too, Jones and Green and Fernvale. When Joe—"

"We've thought o' that already," snapped big Sam Husing. "Joe Graham will be better off without a guy that can't run the spread!"

"Yeah, and yuh might get away now, Caswell, but Sheriff Munn will shore catch up with yuh!" Gus Grell's lowered brows showed that the man was watching cat-like for the slightest opening. But none appeared; the youth kept his gun alert as he backed through the doorway with the bitter knowledge that he was beaten, that now it was a question of personal safety in flight.

He had kicked their little heap of weapons outside. Suddenly Ben whirled, slammed the door, and snatched up a two-by-four lying handy. Before they could rush forward he had the board well propped. At once he took to his heels in the direction of the corral.

A saddled horse appeared before him, evidently belonging to someone just come in from the range. Ben Caswell snatched the reins, leaped astride, and was off amid clattering hooves, swallowed by the night.

HALF an hour later he paused in the deep gloom of cottonwoods beside Baines' Creek. No sound of pursuit reached him, and the youth dismounted to rest his horse. Lips pursed and face wearing a look of sober reflection, he reviewed the final events of his downfall as acting foreman.

He had failed so utterly and completely that the best thing now was to leave Littleton County and start anew somewhere else. His reputation was gone and he had lost all authority over Joe's men. Probably would lose the respect of Graham himself on his return from Chicago. And all this trouble because he hadn't whipped Gus Grell! He ground his teeth in self-accusation. A fine mess!

Of course the quirt and envelope affair had been a trick—a pretty bald one—on Grell's part. The man had swelled with self-confidence until his jealousy demanded complete removal of his rival. Anyone could procure a Littleton Bank envelope, Ben supposed. And as to the quirt—well, it was a simple matter for Grell to tuck that into his bedroll and then find it.

Caswell stiffened as a thought struck him. Scene by scene, he repictured the brief, pungent drama in the ranch-house office. Then uttering an exclamation, he drove one fist into his other palm.

"Gosh!" he breathed. "I—I didn't turn the dial. The safe ain't really locked!"

For some time he stood sucking a cigarette in the blackness of the cottonwood patch. At last he shook his head, heaved a brief sigh, and turned toward his horse. "Reckon I lost out completely so far as holdin' the job goes," he muttered, inserting a booted toe into a stirrup. "But I got to go back an' lock that safe, 'cause Gus Grell 'ud shore have me in a bad light if somebody stole that six hundred bucks of payroll!"

SLOWLY and with eyes roving the darkness ahead, he started for the Bar G Circle. All he need do was to spin the safe's dial, then light out again. It was risky, but well worth the trip, to keep faith with the cattleman by protecting his money.

Proceeding with caution, Ben neared the ranch buildings sometime after ten o'clock. The bunkhouse was a blot of darkness in the moonlight that seeped through ominous clouds. Caswell paused in speculation; then he swung from his mount and dropped reins on the ground. Slowly, warily, he strode forward, halting beside the corral to look and listen.

The Bar G Circle lay wholly quiet.

Walking softly, he headed for the ranch office which he knew would not be locked since he had the key in his overalls pants. About to grasp the doorknob, Ben stiffened with quick-sucked breath. A match had been struck within!

His fingers on the Colt tightened and his pulse began to race. Ever so softly he grasped the door knob and opened. Then, with suddenness which stabbed even his alert brain, a coarse voice boomed out:

"Up with yore hands, Caswell—an' quick!"

For answer Ben clenched his trigger. In the resultant stab of orange flame he glimpsed two men, one bending to the open safe, the other at a crouch with two .45's leveled his way. Both guns exploded, but the slugs whizzed close over Ben's shoulder without damage.

The man at the safe was Gus Grell. That briefly snatched glimpse seemed to do something to Ben. The desire sprang into his breast to maul the bully, to crash both fists into that jowled, jealous countenance—to *smash* the man!

A second shot from his own gun brought a scream of pain and fear from Snipe Daly. Without further ado the sneak whirled and made one dive for the window. Glass spattered, a body slammed to earth, and another scream of pain showed that Snipe was injured, that he would not rise at once.

AT the first shot Gus Grell had leaped erect. Now his great shoulders loomed before Caswell and one ham-like fist snapped the youth's jaw upward. A gun gleamed as it raised to fire; but with a swift wave of his own weapon Ben knocked it skidding across the floor.

Shouts floated from the bunkhouse and men came tumbling out. Fernvale raced around the office corner in time to receive a hurtling body full in the stomach. A head slammed into Runt Jones' chest. With gasped-out cries they staggered back, lost their guns, and went down.

Gus Grell was first on his feet. He looked once at the waddies with whom he had collided, then sighted his quarry. With a bull-like roar he charged full at Ben Caswell who stood clearly outlined in a pool of moonlight, gun tossed aside, a sardonic grimness on his face, waiting.

"I'll butcher yuh this time, yuh dirty puppy!" roared Grell. He sparred, shot a left at Ben's chin, and was astonished to have his wrist caught in a grip of iron. Instantly Caswell whirled to present his back, jerked forward, and hauled the bully close.

Came a bellow of pain and rage, and to the astonishment of everyone, Gus Grell's thick form described an arc over Caswell's shoulder and struck with a resounding thud to earth.

Somebody leveled a .45, but Preston's own gun took command. "Let 'em fight!" he snapped with icy determination. "Anybody that interferes gets a slug in his craw!"

Grell had leaped up to spar again. A look of puzzlement played on the man's face, as if he were not certain just what had occurred. But he slowly closed in, hurling swift lefts and rights which Caswell avoided as best he could.

"Come on!" panted the youth in molten anger. "I'm goin' to beat the devil out've yuh this time, yuh skunk! I'll knock—"

"Go on, Gus! Kill the little squirt! Tear 'im apart!" cried out Snipe Daly.

Grell looked around. He seemed to find general persuasion in the faces of the onlookers, and gathered himself to charge again. He was more the tactician now, dancing this way and that, landing another tooth-rocking slam to Ben's outthrust chin.

"Hang on, kid!" howled Ike Preston. *"Hang on!"*

ENCOURAGED by his success, Grell tried to follow it up. Again Ben retreated little by little, and as before,

Gus could not land a knockout blow. He lost patience and bored in, flailing wildly with both box-like fists, seeking his chance to knee below the belt, to gouge eyes with his big thumbs.

Too quick to let the other clinch, Ben Caswell dove in as Grell flashed past. Now he had his rival secure with both arms around the neck. Instantly he turned his back again, bent forward, and yanked. It was a duplicate of the former trick, and when the man's two hundred pounds had landed with force that made the earth tremble, the fight was over.

Grell lay motionless, breathing hard. For an instant there was taut silence as the punchers stared wide-eyed at the young acting foreman. "S-say!" chattered Snipe Daly, first to speak. "Yuh—yuh killed him!"

Ben straightened. He had not escaped unharmed, but the damage done him was much less than in the cattle pen fight. He shook his head. "He'll come around.

"Boys," he gasped, and flung his hands apart in a gesture of utter honesty, "I came—back to lock the safe—on account of I'd forgot it when I had yuh—lined up in the office. Nabbed Daly an' Grell taking the payroll: that's what started this ruckus. Look!" he exclaimed as Snipe Daly darted quick glances for an avenue of escape. "That buzzard's still got some o' the dough in his hand!"

Preston seized Daly. "He's plumb right, you hombres. I was ridin' in from the herd. Saw a light inside the office an' saw Caswell nab these two gents. Come on, be fair!" he urged Jones, Husing, Green, and Fernvale. "Yuh went with Grell because he beat up the kid. Wal, Ben shore won this little match. Now what about fair play?"

Caswell stooped to pick up his gun and holstered it. He took two steps away, then paused. "Boys, I'll get off the Bar G if yuh want it that way. If yuh'll stand by Joe Graham's interests under Grell, I'll drop everything and mosey. But—"

"Hey, for gosh sakes!" Runt Jones stooped, snatched up a packet that lay almost at his feet, and straightened excitedly. "Gimme a match, quick! Wal, I'll be—"

"Littleton Bank!" broke in Ike Preston. He sent a boring look at Ben Caswell, who stepped closer to see. "Bonds, by the great soupspoon o' Cleopatra!"

"Ike, yuh keep yore gun on Snipe an' Grell. 'Cause shore as there's a steer in Wyoming, Gus dropped these here bonds the fust time Ben throwed him!"

THERE followed a taut silence. Men stared at each other and frowned. As if by common consent, everyone nodded. "Wal," Fernvale said at last, and came forward with his hand outthrust to Ben Caswell, "I reckon yuh win, at that. We better hand this pair over to the law, as it might mean clearin' up the bank job.

"Me, I'm satisfied who's boss here," he concluded with a wry grin. "But say: whatever brand o' fightin' was that, Ben? Never did see yuh scrap like that before, and it was shore neat!"

Young Caswell grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "Sing Lah calls it ju jitsu. Wal, boys, I'm tuckered; I'm gonna hit the hay. Ike, yuh better hole up this pair in one o' the out-sheds. G'night, boys."

And to hide the exultation that flamed in his bruised face, that sent blood rushing faster through his veins, the acting foreman of the Bar G Circle strode away, satisfied.

THE END

Dead Man's Spurs

By ERIC THANE

A PAIR of stained, worn spurs. That was all. They jingled thinly in Tige Moberly's shaking hands as he turned them over and over, staring at them almost uncomprehendingly. It wasn't possible that their owner, Moberly's partner of half a decade, had no need of them any more.

Yet it was so. The thin, wiry man known as Skull lay stiffly inert against the wall of the cut-bank. Ten minutes ago he'd been in Moberly's arms, gasping, "Pard, I reckon—I'm cashin'. But I always wanted t' die in my boots. Pard, d'you mind packin' my spurs along with yuh—jest t'—wal, I reckon I'm a loco, old fool, but—"

"I get you, pard. I'll keep 'em. I won't ferget you."

"Thanks." This in a faint whisper. "Git them cayuses over—t' the hills, Tige. Storm comin'!" His head turned wearily, to peer at a pyramid of black piling up in the northwest. "Reckon it's a spring

blizzard most likely. You'll never make it, gettin' them cayuses home, not with Glassmer after 'em!" he said, with a sudden energy which quickly exhausted him.

"You'll never git 'em back to the hills!" he repeated. Then he slumped, his muscles like putty. His blood-soaked collar rustled in a chill of ice that moaned from that northwestern cloud inferno.

Tige Moberly shivered. Tall and slender, square-jawed, straight-nosed and with eyes bleakly blue like the southern sky, he was a prairie man from the tip of his worn boots to his thatch of straw-hued hair. The wind and sun and blizzards of Montana and Alberta had tanned his cheeks to the color and consistency of leather, out of which the amazing blue of his eyes blazed bluer by contrast.

Underneath his stained riding pants, buckskin shirt with fringes on it, and cowhide vest, his muscles rippled with the ease of one who knew how to use them. Two words, a phrase, characterized him better than anything else: "all man!"

Fifty yards away a band of cayuses stamped impatiently and shouldered into the freshening wind.

They were sleek animals, well broken, trained, and valuable. Skull and Tige had been bringing them from the Madison country up to the OX outfit in the Sweetgrass Hills, in spite of the fact that the tail-end rigor of winter had scarcely broken enough to permit safe travel.

But orders had been orders. Neither partner had had any misconceptions concerning the dangers of their task. But one thing they hadn't figured on—outlaws! Coldey and Hip Glassmer, brothers spawned of the prairie's worst, horse-thieves and rustlers. And, now, murderers!

A bullet from one of them had cut short the career of the pale-faced being who lay sprawled against the side of the cut-bank. Tige, stunned, now came to a realization of things.

Fury like a sullen flood throbbed through him, blurring the day. His head seemed caught in a vise, shattered by repeated sledge-hammer blows, until his body was a flame of vengeance. Gun in hand, he scrambled to the top of the bank, to reel in the blast that here swept unimpeded, to stare and stare at two tiny figures on the horizon, riding in retreat.

He'd taken a dozen swift steps in pursuit when the foolishness of what he was doing assailed him, and reluctantly brought his boots to a stop. Trembling and sweating, he forced himself to calmness, and returned to the still man.

He jingled the spurs again. Something seemed bursting in him for expression. Skull was ten years older than he; he'd always felt, all during their partnership, that he was under the wing of the elder man.

He'd been son to Skull, and he loved him like a son. He lifted a dripping face upward, to curse the Glassmers. They'd die for this! He'd ride after them, overtake them, kill them! Now! He dropped the spurs, spun the cylinder of his gun. He hadn't many cartridges; not more than a dozen; he and Skull had wasted most of them shooting at marks. But enough! Enough to send a slug apiece through Hip's and Coldey Glassmer's rotten hearts.

He'd almost gained his horse before remembrance of something brought him to a halt.

Skull's gasped words: "You'll never make it, gittin' them cayuses home, not with Glassmer after 'em." Tige stood very still, shaking in the wind, slowly battering the fury within him to a cessation. Always, fury had been his greatest fault. It was to him what liquor was to most men—a goad, senseless, driving, terrifying in its power.

But now the memory of Skull's last words cooled him. He knew without thinking further that Skull was mocking him, daring him. Perhaps the dead man had realized the fault of his younger partner; their task was to get the cayuses home, and Skull was not a man to lay down on a job, not even if it resulted in his death.

He'd wanted Tige to complete their work, and his dying words had been a spur to Tige and a check upon his temper. Tige didn't stop to realize this; what he saw was the dare of the dead man: "You'll never make it, gittin' them cayuses home, not with Glassmer after 'em!"

So he wouldn't, would he? He retraced his steps to the spurs, picked them up. Two spurs, stained and worn. That was all. But they were Skull's spurs. Only, he'd not need them any more. Subconsciously, they came to symbolize something in Tige Moberly's mind. Two tasks

that he must do before he could rest—or Skull could rest.

He must get the horses home, and he must get the Glassmers. The first, because Skull wished it; the second, because Skull had been his partner. He'd loved Skull.

The spurs jingled in his shaking hand. And then he was suddenly very cold, determined. Cold from something more than the icy thrust of the wind. Determination! The frigid blue of his eyes crystallized into what men had learned to fear. Tige Moberly would go through hell and high water for those two spurs.

AN hour later, with the sweat freezing on him, he stood beside a cairn of rock which was topped off by a big boulder on which Tige had scratched,

Skull. A good hombre.

Skull's first name, he'd never known. Or anything of his life. Skull was, like himself, a drifting cowboy, a top-hand eagerly sought after but prevented from settling down by the eternal urge of the wanderlust.

Tige tore himself from that grave. The wind had assumed the fury of a blizzard, the sky was entirely overcast by now, and stray streaks of snow whipped along. He unstrapped the heavy sheepskin coat from his saddle and donned it. Then he got the cayuses into action.

Night was beginning to fall, and he knew that he must find shelter in some coulee before blackness came entirely. He might have remained here, but this was too close to Skull. He tied the spurs on the horn of his saddle. They jingled thinly with a sound not perceptible above the screech of the wind.

He'd driven scarcely two miles before he chanced upon such a coulee. The cayuses tumbled into it eagerly; it was almost impossible to breast them into the wind; they were continually turning tail to it, though the Sweetgrass Hills were north.

Tige unsaddled his mount and hobbled it, though this he knew was unnecessary. No living being would venture out upon the wind-swept prairie tonight. Down here it was fairly calm. By dint of great effort he managed to kindle a fire of dried sage stems and cow dung. It smoked up streakily, but it was warmth of a sort and heat by which to boil coffee. But he found, strangely, that he had little appetite.

Remembrance of that stone cairn miles back contracted his throat so that food choked him. He tried to sleep. Dozed; awoke; dozed again; awoke to replenish the fire, and then slept lightly.

Two spurs. Dead man's spurs, worn and stained. Tige saw before him Coldey Glassmer. He struggled for his gun; couldn't get it. Then the scene changed. Skull, alive and well. Skull dying, gasping out, "You'll never make it."

He awoke to cramped fingers and stinging cheeks. The wind seemed to have abated, and with its partial cessation came a thing he dreaded: cold. The cayuses huddled together for warmth, but there was no such comfort for him. He settled deep down in his sheepskin, back to the fire, and waited for dawn.

Dawn. The wind no longer blew with the hell-fury which had characterized its onslaught into the spring day of the previous evening, but it was strong enough to drift the cayuses. They refused to head into it, and Tige had to content himself by driving cattywampum, like a mariner attempting to tack into a breeze. Snow whipped along the ground, but the day was clear enough. In the north, thrusting white spires above the horizon, were the tips of the Sweetgrass Hills. Tige kept his eyes on them all morning.

How far they seemed! So Skull thought he'd never make it, did he? Well, he'd fool Skull. He heard himself laugh aloud when he thought that. Fool Skull! Why, Skull was dead! You couldn't fool a dead man!

But maybe Skull's ghost was following him. The Blackfeet believed in ghosts. Tige was not a superstitious man, but he got the feeling that perhaps he was trailed. And by something more substantial than a spirit. He twisted in his saddle to see, on the brow of a snow-swept hill not far away, two men. The Glassmers!

Rage went through him; he drove his mount to a race, and dragged out his gun, firing as he went.

But when he reached the hill the Glassmers were gone. And he'd shot away all but six of his cartridges. But he didn't think of that; his blood was still boiling; he had difficulty in controlling himself.

For a long time his heart by its harsh pulsation seemed about to tear him to pieces, but he eventually achieved self-

control. His blood icier than the wind, he drove slowly on, morbidly fretting, straining at some invisible leash like the wild writhings of a captured soul in torment. The spurs were grim and relentless taskmasters.

He tied his neckerchief about his ears and huddled his solid shoulders and long arms deeper into the sheepskin. He thought little. Mainly he felt, in a remote sort of way, as if he were merely an onlooker and not an actor.

The whine of the wind seemed a long way off; the heavy weight of the holstered gun against his hip was impersonal, belonging to another being, not Tige Moberly. A being who rode leadenly behind a herd of cayuses, his eyebrows frosted, his unshaven face dark, his lips grim, and his eyes a hard, hard blue.

The sun, without warmth, gleamed in the frosty air. It had passed the zenith when again Tige sighted the Glassmers.

Swiftly he fumbled for his gun; dragged it out, to send four bullets crashing after them. Without effect. And again his whole being was shattered by the force of his fury. But he held himself. He'd get Coldey and Hip Glassmer in the long run.

Why they hung about he could not divine. It never occurred to him that they might be playing a game, deliberately urging him to shoot away all his cartridges.

He'd had six left until this last encounter; now he had two. But he didn't think; rage was too potent an emotion to permit sane thought when it swayed Tige.

Toward evening the wind veered into the southwest, following one of those uncertainties which are the curse—and infrequently the blessing—of the Montana plains. In the space of a half hour the temperature from ten below had risen to above freezing. The chinook with the howl of a wolf and a breath of steam charged in.

Within the next few minutes Tige was compelled to shed his coat, with sweat, heat sweat, oozing out upon his brown forehead and dampening the crisp blondness of his close-cropped hair.

The cayuses veered to drift with the wind. This was good. The Sweetgrass spires were perceptibly closer. Tige congratulated himself that he had been able to make any progress at all against the teeth of the north wind, but then, he was an extraordinary handler of horses. He'd kept the cayuses together where an ordinary herder would have been helpless.

He made camp in a coulee again. He felt there was little danger of the animals drifting off, because the wind was still too strong.

There'd be no necessity for nighthawking. Memories of Skull were dimmed; but the spurs were there, goading him, ripping at him, tearing into his flesh. He dozed at intervals. At midnight he awoke, to feel again the bite of an icy wind; wind had shifted to the north once more. This was bad, especially for a prairie covered with melted snow.

At dawn he forged out into a world of glass, of ice; of hills of ice over which the cayuses floundered, slipping dangerously, to fall and stagger. He couldn't ride; he slipped along, leading his mount. But today he managed to drive straight into the face of the hell-wind and make progress. The cayuses constantly tailed against the frost, but Tige resolutely drove them on.

SO he wouldn't make the ranch! Another man might not, but Tige Moberly would! He'd die before he'd quit. The spurs ripped him, held him to his course.

The sun was again a frosty, white flare, without heat or life. At mid-morning one of the cayuses slipped, to fall without rising again. A broken leg. Tige sent a bullet into the beautiful head, shuddering as he did so.

He bethought himself then of the condition of his ammunition. One shell left! Like a blinding flash came the premonition of why the Glassmers had been hounding him, out of his reach. They'd taken advantage of his insane weakness of temper to disarm him by deliberately urging him to waste all his ammunition upon hopeless shots at them!

Cursing himself, he regarded the solitary cartridge in his palm. Enough to kill one of them! He'd have to get the other with his bare hands. Then he looked up, to see them not far away. They gestured, insolently. They knew he was near the end of his ammunition. And when he was—

What would they do? He could only surmise. He'd be helpless. He cursed again. What a fool he'd been to fall for

their clever ruse! One cartridge left, one load of death. A capable load in his expert hands. While he had this, they'd never come close. He must conserve it; it was his pass to the hills.

Why they didn't pot him at long distance, he didn't know. Nor care. What mattered was they'd never close in on him as long as he had this solitary cartridge.

The sun was at zenith, still flaming whitely, but the wind had begun to change again. A rotten film appeared upon the ice. Tige mounted, but riding was still dangerous. And then, at mid-afternoon, another of the cayuses slipped, struggled, groaned, and lay still, panting heavily.

Tige walked up to it, revolver in hand. One load left! He could ride on and leave the cayuse here to suffer a lingering death. Or he could save it agony, and open himself to attack.

He didn't hesitate. Not Tige Moberly. A single crash sounded above the whine of the wind; powder smoke whipped into shreds. Slowly, Tige replaced the gun. And Hip and Coldey Glassmer rode down upon him.

The wind was dying slowly. To the north the Sweetgrass Hills seemed very close; far in the west the Rockies saw-toothed into a watery sky. The spurs on Tige's saddle-horn jingled thinly. He was cold all over, but not from the wind.

"Howdy!" greeted Coldey. He was a short, squat man, hook-nosed in a way suggestive of some bird of prey, broad and unwieldy of shoulder, short of leg and paunchy. In his heavy garments of sheepskin he seemed like some shapeless monster.

His brother Hip was younger, softer. His sagging jowls and deep-set eyes evidenced the same life of dissipation led by his elder brother, but somehow his was not yet the hardness of the cold-blooded outlaw. But he was dangerous. Unmerciful. That went for both of them. They were human coyotes!

"Howdy, Coldey!"

"Been quite a spell sense we met each other last, eh, Tige? Back in Miles City, wasn't it?"

"Yeh, when I knocked hell outa you fer beatin' thet hawss."

Coldey's face darkened. Manifestly the remembrance was distasteful. He twisted in his seat, eyes steadily refusing to meet the blue flame under Tige's bleached lashes.

"Nice hawsses, them." He indicated the cayuses. "Whose outfit?"

"You know as well as I do! The OX bunch."

"Yuh mean they *was* the OX bunch," Coldey guffawed stridently. "They belong to Coldey an' Hip Glassmer, startin' now."

Tige's body was a flame of temper. But he held himself in. His temper had got him into this situation; it wouldn't do to permit it to drag him in deeper.

"Yeh?" he questioned coolly.

"Yeh!" returned Hip flatly, breaking in for the first time.

"Y' know, Tige—" Coldey shifted in his seat, dragged out a plug and worried off a cud—"yo're plumb lucky we didn't drill you when we got Skull. But Skull, he was no good t' us, whereas you was."

"I was some puzzled why you hadn't got me," admitted Tige slowly.

"Wal, yo're a hawss-wrangler from away back, an' we got need of jest such a hombre. Them cayuses are goin' to be shoved over into Idaho. Now, there's a trick to crossin' the mountains, an' Hip, here, an' me, we figgered you'd be the man. We actin' as bosses, uh course. We ain't much hand with hawsses."

"I see."

"Shore you see," Coldey smiled. "We figgered it'd be plumb unsafe ridin' up on you when you had guns flamin', so me an' Hip, here, we waited until you'd shot yoreself out. We knew how many ca'tridges yuh had. We counted 'em one night back in town down south, an' been countin' the shots since!"

"Didn't aim t' take any chances, did you?" said Tige, deliberately forcing a jeer into his tone.

"Meanin'?"

"What d'you reckon it means?" demanded Tige insolently. He tensed himself. The rage in Coldey's eyes was appalling; he resented the imputation of cowardice, but cunning held him back. He had use for Tige, Tige knew, and upon that immunity the wrangler depended for the bravado of his tongue.

"We ain't arguin'!" cut in Hip, "Tige, crawl yore hawss an' git them cayuses trailin'. Head west."

"Wind's thet way. Can't head 'em into it!"

"Clever hawss hombre, like you, can't?

An' here you was headin' 'em straight into the north wind today! What d'you reckon we saved you fer, instead uh pluggin' you like we did Skull?"

"Move!" commanded Coldey, his voice the harsh crack of a whip. He dragged out his gun, swung it up. "Y' movin'?"

"I reckon so. What d'you think?" flashed Tige.

Sullenly he mounted and got the cayuses into action. The spurs on the horn jingled thinly. Into his mind flashed a picture of a cairn of rock, around which coyotes prowled in baffled bewilderment.

THE wind was dying, and with its gradual cessation the speed of the cayuses increased. Night swung down; for a brief moment the serrated edges of the Rockies were silhouetted against a sky of brass. Then the world became a gulf of black lighted only by glittering stars and a green aurora that hung, like the jagged edge of a torn piece of silk, along the northern horizon.

Abruptly the cayuses plunged down steep bluffs, to come to a halt in a jungle of cottonwoods bordering a river.

"The Marias, I reckon," Hip opined. "We'll camp here tonight, eh, Coldey? Wind's down an' we'll have to nighthawk. I'll take first shift an' you second. Get them cayuses bunched in the brush, an' we'll eat."

Crystal flames leaped from the dry fire. Hip and Coldey ate like wolves. They paid little attention to Tige, insolent in the completeness of their power over him. Upon a trail, he headed for the dark beyond the flames.

"Where y' goin'?" snapped Coldey. He bored up his gun. The tiny circle of black muzzle menaced Tige.

"Aw, nowhere."

"Listen, Tige, git this: yo're valuable to us, an' we'd hate t' load you full uh lead, but don't ferget Skull. You stay alongside this fire. Yo're stayin' here tonight."

After supper Hip got to his feet and stalked into the dark. Coldey turned to Tige.

"Lay down!"

Tige hadn't expected this, but obedient to the gun's menace, he followed directions. Coldey passed a lasso around his ankles, across his back and around his wrists.

"I reckon thet'll hold yuh until tomorrow," he observed grimly. Without removing boots or gun, he wrapped himself in a cowhide and snored close to the fire.

Night. Stars. Northern lights. And two spurs. Tige was very cold. He didn't think much of himself. He had to escape, the quickest way. Inch by inch he rolled towards the fire. Once Coldey stirred, and Tige lay very still, cold sweat bathing him. But Coldey only groaned, turned and snored again.

Tige reached the fire. Very carefully he thrust his feet into it, to char the ropes—and flesh. He beat out the flames that ate into the hemp and tugged his legs apart. That much free! Then he thrust his hands into the coals. Pain like a drenching sheet of agony ran over him, but his wrists came free. It was a matter of moment to free himself entirely.

He lay upon one hand, and underneath him he could feel the heavy bulge of his useless gun. Then he fixed his eyes upon the sleeping Coldey. Beneath the cowhide blanket he glimpsed the man's cartridge belt, well-filled.

His gun was in such a position that it could not be taken without waking the sleeper. But that was all right. Cartridges were what Tige needed. He might strangle the sleeping man, kill him, but that would not take care of Hip. Only lead would do that.

Then steps and the crashing of brush warned of approach. Tige rolled for his place, bringing the charred ropes with him.

Hip rode out into the firelight, to dismount and shake his brother, who awoke with a curse and a sleepy look.

"What's the matter, Hip?"

"Nothin', pard. Jest wanted a smoke, is all. Gimme a cigar!"

"You'll find 'em in my saddlebags. Now, git out, an' gimme some sleep!"

He settled himself more firmly against his gun. What hopes Tige had had of snatching the weapon vanished then. Hip, with a careless glance at him, rummaged in the saddlebags and found a cigar, which he lighted from the fire. He stood a moment in thought, then mounted again, to disappear. Coldey snored.

Tige edged forward. Inch by inch. He didn't know how sound a sleeper Coldey was, but judging from the snores he was thoroughly enjoying his rest. Tige heard

the shift and fret of horses somewhere down the canyon, not far away.

By the indications, Hip was holding them closely. Once a curse echoed, followed by a brief, blundering race of hoofs. Then silence. Tige edged on. He was cold as ice. No temper. This was no time for temper.

He rolled alongside the sleeping man, reached out his long, strong fingers and, slipping them under the robe, dragged lightly at a cartridge. But the sleeper stirred, and Tige hastily withdrew his hand, to hug the ground.

Coldey shifted and groaned. Was he about to awaken? Tige stiffened himself for a forward leap. But he didn't want to fight it out that way. He wanted to face Coldey, man to man, gun to gun, and shoot it out with him, remembering all the time this was one of the men who had killed Skull.

He wanted Coldey to die knowing why he died. Not as he might die now—the victim of a single, furious leap which would crush him into insensibility before he realized what it was all about.

Minutes passed. Then Coldey settled down. And again Tige's fingers darted forward. The nails hooked over the flange of a cartridge, tugged lightly, and the copper case came loose and out to Tige. That was one! Again he reached in, groped along the leather belt, hooked over a cartridge, and withdrew it.

Two! He transferred them to his left palm, clutching them convulsively. There were many gaps in Coldey's belt, and this time, the third attempt, Tige's arm had to slide far under the robe.

And as he lay there, groping, he felt rather than heard danger behind him. Instinct roused him upright, turning him to meet it. But before he saw what it was, before he could fight it, blackness crashed against him, and the stars above blurred into great, white streaks that turned red, and then—to nothing.

He awoke to a paralysis of body and a gradual paralysis of mind. He lay there, flickering starlight in his eyes, his mind groping for sensations, explanations, solution of this limbo into which he had so suddenly been thrust. There were voices.

"Wal, if thet ain't a hell of a note! Why'd yuh go an' shoot him, Hip?"

And Hip's harsh answer, "Wal, he was reachin' fer yore gun! If I hadn't, he'd dragged thet iron an' plugged you shore!"

ACROSS the sky surged streamers of color that Tige knew were only in his mind. Gradually they ceased. He lived. His neck was stiff, tortured. He didn't attempt to move; he had the sense to lie still, but he knew the bullet must have taken him through the collar. He felt no particular pain; manifestly the wound was not fatal. But did Coldey think so?

Through the racing flames that blurred his sight, he glimpsed that outlaw striding over to him. He felt a sodden blow in his side. A boot tip, harshly driven. He flinched, but not as much as a living man might; pain seemed somehow deadened.

"Yep, near dead, I reckon. Ain't this a hell of a fix! We'll have tuh shove them cayuses over the mountains ourselves, an' I ain't hankerin' fer thet job."

Two copper-and-steel nuggets burned the palm of Tige's left hand. Two loads of death. Neither Hip nor Coldey suspected that he'd got them.

"Wal, what's done is done, I reckon," said Hip sullenly. Manifestly he and his brother were at knife's edge. "He's daid now. What say we pull outa here?"

"Tonight?"

"Why not? I ain't hankerin' to hang around here. We'll pull out in the mornin' anyway."

"Them cayuses ain't any too tame, an' we ain't night drivin'," vetoed Coldey. "Get the notion outa yore head. Pack thet carcass out into the brush."

"Do it yoreself!"

"Scared, huh?" sneered the elder brother. "Wal, I'm not!" Tige tensed himself. His muscles were limber now—not sodden, as they had been after the shot. When Coldey touched him, he'd discover the wrangler wasn't dead. Tige cursed his luck. But fate interrupted. The horses in the cottonwoods stamped abruptly.

"What's thet?" cried Hip.

"Go see. I'm throwin' this yap out in the brush." Coldey came on determinedly. The alarm of the horses failed to deter him. Fate didn't work satisfactorily. Tige held himself taut. Coldey's arm darted out; talon fingers grasped for Tige. And Tige, dragging himself upright, flopped out of his grasp, to come to a halt in the dead ashes that ringed the fire.

"Hell, he ain't dead!" cried Hip.

Coldey nodded. Tight-lipped, he regarded Tige.

"Wal, thet's plumb fortunate. We'll be usin' him to drive."

The two cartridges burned Tige's palm. Deliberately, he staggered upright, fell, squirmed, weaved aimlessly; and all of it wasn't feigned. But his head cleared rapidly.

The horses whistled in alarm. "Go see what it is," cried Coldey. "Mebby a coyote!"

He turned, his back to Tige for a moment. Tige pitched forward. He lay with his right side in shadow. Squirming, he dragged out his gun, wriggled it under him.

"Seems t' hurt you!" observed Coldey, cruelly, facing him, "Yuh flop like a stuck pig! Wal, I hope yuh live! Them hawsses need herdin'!"

He went to Tige's saddle, examined it critically. For once Tige's rage didn't rise. At other times, the man's cruelty would have dazed him, thrown him into a killing mood. But not tonight.

It wasn't the outlaw's cruelty that put him in the killer's mood. It was the two spurs that he unhooked from the horn and looked at critically.

Tige slipped the cartridges into the firing chambers. Then he got to his knees.

"Coldey!"

The outlaw turned, dangling the spurs. Into his face leaped a look which, but for the tensity of the moment, might have been comical.

"I'm not dead, Coldey! Jest hurt! Hold them spurs tight, Coldey! They belonged to the hombre you killed—the man I loved!"

Coldey shook as with an ague. But still he held the spurs. His eyes popped. His mouth opened unpleasantly. But he made no sound.

"Them's Skull's spurs! I carry 'em to remind me to kill you!"

Hip crashed into the light, blinking. It was seconds before he grasped the situation. Then, with a curse, he went for his gun. Tige waited. Midway, the man's hand halted. He shook in his boots.

"Scared?" jeered Tige. "Yuh wasn't so scared when you plugged Skull!"

"But—but—"

"Two spurs!" Tige seemed to be reciting a piece he'd learned. "They're drivin' me on. Skull reckoned I wouldn't git back to the OX outfit. But I will, now. I see why Skull dared me; he was scared of my temper. Wal, I ain't got no temper now. I'm cold. Cold as ice!

"Yo're plenty hard, Coldey! While ago yuh thought I was bad hurt, floppin' around here! Yuh laughed! Why don't yuh laugh now?"

"He's bluffin'!" cried Hip hoarsely. "Thet gun's empty!"

"Go fer yores an' see!"

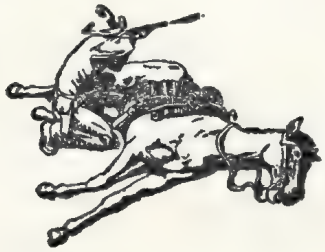
Hip's hand dropped, flamed up. Tige fired. The outlaw spun to one side, and dropped, a slowly spreading crimson stain appearing upon his shirt. Dead center. He'd been dead before he sprawled against the ground.

"Spurs!" cried Tige.

Coldey dropped them. Went for his gun. It came out. Golden flame spread from it. Tige felt the sinister hiss of death close by his ear. But not a second time. Coldey collapsed and slumped forward, upon the spurs.

Tige dropped his gun. He heard himself laugh. And now rage, in a red wave, jarred him. But he conquered it. It seemed easy to conquer temper, now. He dragged the spurs from under Coldey's body. He stood before the almost dead fire, his shirt red with blood from a wound he knew was not too bad, his long fingers turning those spurs over and over. They jingled thinly, and down the canyon the cayuses stamped and fretted.

Two spurs, stained and worn. That was all.



Trail of Hate

By CLAUDE RISTER

THE tragedy occurred in Desolate Canyon, two miles north of the town of Coldwater. A streak of flame scarred the night. The crashing sound of a shot filled the mighty depression, slapping sharply against weather grooved walls of stone, muttering, and then dying away.

Mel Rogers gasped, threw up his hands and reeled. His mount snorted and plunged. Mel flopped to the rocky trail—a dead man!

A moment of lonely stillness, and then a skulking human form rose from behind a boulder and cautiously approached the still figure. The murderer stooped, hastily searched the body, confiscated certain things; then hurried to a horse that was concealed within a rocky gulch. A moment later he was riding away.

The body of the slain horse-breaker was found by a range-riding cowboy the next day. Immediately the waddy rode to Coldwater with the news.

Just three days after the dry-gulching of Mel Rogers, Curtis Rogers, twenty-four-year-old brother of the murdered man, arrived in Coldwater. He straightway sought out Deputy Sheriff Long Tom Neeley, an old friend of his, and tersely inquired for details of the killing.

"There ain't much to tell," Long Tom informed the grim-faced, steely-eyed young puncher. "Mel had just sold eight head o' them hosses he'd captured an' tamed. He was on his way back to his camp when it happened. The killer was smart enough to leave no clues."

"Then you've not the slightest idee who done it?"

The lanky deputy was silent for a moment while he frowned and stroked his long chin. "Ye-eh, I got an idee, but idees ain't proof."

"Well, what's yore idee?" Curt's voice snapped. There was an eager glitter in his cold, blue eyes.

"Since you left this country a year ago a man who who calls hisse'f Sonora Keller has come in. Maybe he should of introduced himself as Sonora Killer, for there was four notches on his hawglaig.

"I earmarked him right away as a mighty bad animal — half snake, half skunk. But so far, I ain't been able to lay a loop of the law on him.

"Soon after comin' here he added a coupla more notches to his gun; still I couldn't handle him. He'd made both shootin's look like the other feller's fault, an' self-defense for himself.

"Today I happened to notice he'd added still another notch to his smoke-pole, makin' seven in all. When I asked him how come, he jest grinned an' said there was a certain feller he aimed to kill one of these days; that he had the notch all ready for him.

"Now I believe said notch represents yore murdered brother. Sonora is the kinda killer who takes pride in his bloody work. Just the kind who, feelin' plumb safe after we'd failed to find any clues, would have added the new notch to his score."

"Where is this leadslinger?" Curt Rogers clipped out between tight lips. "I'm right anxious to have a talk with him."

Deputy Tom Neeley straightened his long frame from his battered office chair. "We'll go find him."

He hitched up loosely fitting pants.

"Be mighty careful, though, Curt. Sonora is as deadly as a rattler, an' just as quick on the strike. Besides, I ain't got nothin' agin him but suspicions, remember."

As they stepped outdoors, Long Tom observed: "My! That cayuse of yore'n looks all ga'nt an' tuckered! Laigs spread an' head down!"

"Yeh," mumbled Curt. "I've rode hard. I forgot the little hoss for a minute. I'll put him up at the liv'ry before I do a thing else."

"Yeh, go ahead; meanwhile I'll mosey around town an' locate Sonora. When you come back we'll question him."

CURT had just finished caring for his pony and was leaving the livery stable corral, when from uptown came a sound of pistol shots. He stopped, for a moment stood rigid while a premonition of appalling tragedy held his heart frozen, then with a muttered exclamation he broke into a run.

There were other shots, yells, a thumping of hoofs sounding like boulders raining out of the heavens. As Curt reached the one street he saw a band of riders tearing out of town in a haze of dust, and ahead of them in the distance, a lone horseman riding like the wind.

"What happened?" Curt yapped at the first man whom he approached on the street.

"There's been a shootin'! Sonora Keller plugged Deputy Sheriff Long Tom Neeley over there in the Fillemup!"

Curt headed for the place indicated. As he flung himself between a pair of batwing doors he saw at a glance that the Fillemup was a combination pool hall and drink dispensary.

Stretched out on one of the green-carpeted tables was the lean, lanky form of his friend. Two men were bending over him. One evidently was a bartender; the other a doctor.

"How about it?"

The doctor, a rawboned, mournful-faced man who might have been an undertaker instead of a medico, turned owlish eyes upon the cowboy and said with a dubious shake of the head: "Pretty bad; maybe too bad."

Tom Neeley's lids pulled open. A light of recognition crossed his long, thin face. Curt leaned close and asked: "Just what happened, old friend?"

"I located Sonora in here. As I was walkin' towards him he plunked a silver dollar onto the bar. I recognized said dollar immediate, 'cause there was a dent in the middle of it."

"Yeh, I know! My hoss-breaking brother's lucky piece! In the shootin' scrape he had with that Mex rustler down on the Border five year ago, a bullet struck a silver dollar he'd slipped into a pocket of his vest. The dollar was dented, but he was saved from what might have been a dangerous wound. Afterwards he kept the silver piece as a good luck charm."

Long Tom nodded. "Said lucky piece wasn't on Mel when I searched his body. When I saw Sonora whack it onto the counter an' ask for a drink—well, I sorter lost my head. 'You dirty skunk,' says I. 'You killed Mel Rogers.' "

"What fooled me, his arms were crossed on the bar an' he didn't make a play for the notched hawglaig at his thigh.

"Before I realized what was happenin' he'd pulled a gun from under his vest an' was shootin' over his crooked right arm. He shore done me up. The doc says I'll prob'ly never ride again. One of the bullets plowed acrost my loins an' lodged in the spinal column."

"Ain't you a cheerful buzzard!" Curt told the doctor sarcastically. The medico turned up bony hands in a mournful gesture of hopelessness. When Curt looked again at his friend, the deputy sheriff was unconscious.

At noon of the following day the possemen returned. They reported that Sonora Keller had escaped amidst the Forlorn Hills, a wild stretch of outlaw country into which peace officers seldom ventured.

Curt went to his deputy friend, who had just regained consciousness. "Tom, I'm going after this Sonora feller myself. I'll bring him back, or else either me or him will die."

"Don't be foolish, kid," whispered the wounded man. "Nobody can go up there and bring out an outlaw. The other desperaders won't let him. It's been tried before."

"I'm going," Curt repeated tersely. "Hope the best for you, and—so long." Wheeling, he walked out of the little hospital room.

"Pore Curt!" sighed Long Tom Neeley. "He's a mighty fine young waddy. I'm sorry he's ridin' to his death! No use tryin' to stop him, though. I know the breed."

Down at the livery stable a short time later, as he rode away from the corral on a hired horse, Curt Rogers muttered:

"Dry-gulched my brother; maybe crippled good ol' Tom for life! Well, the rattler will pay! I don't care if he's hiding behind Satan's coat-tails in the fieriest corner of Hades! I'll get him!"

CURT ROGERS was an expert at the art of tracking. He picked up Sonora Keller's trail at the place where the posse had lost it, and he followed it deep into the fastnesses of that jumble of wildlands known as Forlorn Hills.

The first night, he made camp beside a little spring. At daylight the next morning he was up and pressing on. It was slow, tedious work, but he kept determinedly at it.

Sundown of another day found him approaching a colossal gateway within a long wall of weather worn cliffs. He drew up, half sheltered by a ravine bank, and studied the situation ahead.

The hoofmarks were leading straight toward the gigantic gateway. Perhaps somewhere close behind that mighty portal was the hideout of the outlaws who lived within Forlorn Hills.

If such were the case, there might be guards on some of the pinnacles. He must be very careful.

He moved on; was within three hundred yards of the gateway, when the vicious *cra-a-ang!* of a rifle reverberated among the rock walls and their many crevices. Curt heard the wicked snap of a bullet, passing within a few inches of his head.

He spun his mount, dug with his spurs, and sent the horse plunging into a ravine. Sheltered there by a shale-faced bluff, he built and smoked a cigarette while again considering the situation. Gone now was the impetuosity which had brought him out of Coldwater on a trail of hate. He was calm; deliberately thoughtful.

Dusk was falling. The west was a spread of crimson glory. Cliffs and hills were becoming dark bulwarks. The air within the depressions was slowly being dyed with purple.

"It'll soon be plumb dark," he thought. "I'll wait and try again then."

For thirty minutes he waited. By that time night was definitely at hand. Taking advantage of all possible cover he advanced slowly toward the gigantic gateway, which loomed blackly against a dark-green sky.

Again he stopped. Ahead of him, the rest of the way, the ground was barren save for scattered boulders. He probably would be under fire from the moment he started across that two hundred yards wide stretch of opening. The thing to do was to cross it as quickly as possible.

Wheeling from behind the last clump of bushes, he drove with his spurs and charged. The moon was at the half-full, and so he was seen almost immediately. The sound of rifle shots racked among the cliffs and their crevices. Bullets snapped and whistled through the night. Vicious blades of flame were stabbing the darkness.

Apparently there were but two guards. They were stationed halfway up the cliffs, one on each side of the opening. Curt did not return their fire. He realized that to do so would be a waste of ammunition. Twenty men could not have blasted those two from their hidden positions.

Soon the fire became unbearable. Bullets were slicing the air all about him. They hissed fiercely by his face, skipped from his saddle, tugged at his clothing.

Suddenly he threw up his hands and reeled sidewise from his saddle. The horse raced on, carrying him sprawled backward across the saddle seat, hands almost trailing the ground.

"I got him," a hoarse voice bawled jubilantly.

Curt grinned. The trick was working.

With a ringing of steel shoes upon stone, the wild-eyed, flying-maned horse tore into the gateway. Curt was still dangling, apparently dead but held fast to the saddle in some way.

In their excitement, feeling sure that he had been drilled, both the guards had risen from their sheltered positions. Curt could see them leaning over, peering down at him.

"Yeah, looks like you got 'im, all right," said a second voice, "but I'll make shore of 'im." The speaker threw a rifle to his shoulder.

Pow-wow-ow! The sound of a pistol shot reverberated within the passageway. Employing one of his old rodeo stunts, Curt had drawn and fired from close to the ground, while lying dangling across the saddle. The human target stiffened, dropped the rifle, jerked up hooked hands. The body leaned forward and toppled over a bench of stone.

Curt was pulling himself upright now, and training his gun on the other human form. Had the second guard ducked, he would have been safe, but in his surprise and excitement he remained standing and flung a rifle to his shoulder.

Curt heard the dry clattering of the first guard's Winchester striking rock, and then once more his six-gun spoke. While its voice was still reverberating between the stone walls, he heard the sickening thud of a body, a crunching of bone.

The second guard did not go over the precipice. His knees buckled as he leaned forward, and he jackknifed across a ridge of stone. His rifle, too, clattered onto the rocky floor below. As he raced on through the pass, astride leather again, Curt looked back and saw a body draped across a rocky ridge, arms dangling.

He was within a tremendous canyon, the towering, sheer walls of which swept back on either side as they progressed. So vast was the depression that he could not see its farther end.

Soon he saw a glimmering of lights ahead, and smiled with grim satisfaction. "I guessed it, all right! The outlaw stronghold! Reckon I better take roundance." As the thoughts went through his mind he swung his pony from the trail, and slowed the animal to a trot.

As he drew nearer to the outlaw hangout, he for the first time came to realize how big, how almost impossible of accomplishment, was the job to which he had set himself.

He reasoned with cold soberness that there was not a chance in a hundred of his being able to get Sonora Keller, and then escape from the place alive.

Well, he had started the job and he wouldn't turn back. With stony determination he rode on toward the cluster of lights.

PEEPING from a clump of bushes, Curt Rogers studied the layout of the outlaw rendezvous. Fifty yards away was a long, low building made of adobe, rocks, and logs. The place was lighted. He could see patches of the interior through open windows. He saw a crude

bar; tables where games of chance were in progress; men drinking, gambling, smoking.

"Purty enterprisin', the leader of these wolves," thought Curt. "Runnin' a place of business where the gang can spend their ill-got *dinero*."

Off to the right, and behind the house of recreation was a long, dark lean-to. Here it was, no doubt, that the desperadoes slept at night. Just now every one seemed to be in the recreation hall. To the left, down the valley a way, the dim forms of browsing animals could be seen. The outlaw remuda, Curt guessed.

On foot he slipped around to the back of the main building. He was very cautious in so doing, but he saw not a soul anywhere outside the place.

Through one of the back windows he studied the long room and its contents. There were ten men inside. All were heavily armed. They were rough looking fellows; by odds the toughest looking outfit he ever had laid eyes on. The room was smoke hazy. There was much hard cursing as the outlaws gambled and drank.

Curt's roving eyes soon focused upon Sonora Keller. He knew the man from descriptions given him in Coldwater. Sonora wore a Navajo beaded vest, double-barreled vaquero chaps, and a Mexican style sombrero with a rattlesnake band.

His face was sin-etched. Two beady black eyes glittered beneath very low brows. He had a scraggy mustache, the ends of which hooked down about the corners of a perpetually sneering mouth.

Sonora was sitting at a card table with three other men, near the middle of the room. Curt wondered how he could get the snake, without himself being shot to patch-cloth.

Of a sudden he was startled by the sound of tramping feet. While Curt had been so interested in studying Sonora, one of the men had left the room unnoticed by him, and now was coming down an end of the building.

Curt realized in a flash that it was too late for him to run. He could not get more than halfway down the back of the house before the man would pass the corner near which he was standing. He was sure to be seen and an alarm given, unless—

As the alternative flew into his mind he pulled his Colt forty-five and wheeled toward the near corner. The split instant that the human form came into view he sprang.

The outlaw jerked to a halt. With the instinct of the much hunted man he sent a hand shooting to a low-slung six-gun. His mouth fell open, but no cry came from it.

Whack! Curt's gunbarrel rapped against the man's head and he wilted without so much as uttering a groan.

He seized the victim and dragged him past the corner; then slipped again to the nearest window. He saw at the first glance that Sonora had quit the card game in which he had been engaged, and was approaching the bar.

The sneering fellow clapped down a coin and said: "Gimme a drink of that snake sweat, Charley, an' keep the change. I want no part of this here bullet-dented silver piece. It's bad luck to me. Got me into trouble in Coldwater."

YOUNG CURT ROGERS was a man of peculiar temperament. As a rule he was a quiet, easy-going waddy, but when he did get extremely angry he simply went wild. Now as he saw before him the murderer of his brother, the scoundrel who had perhaps crippled his deputy friend for life as he saw a dirty hand fingering the silver dollar which Mel had treasured as a lucky piece, he went crazy.

It seemed that a caldron of liquid fire overturned within his breast, sending hot fumes whirling into his head. He cared not how many hard-bitten leadslingers were within the room. He was going to get the rattler!

With the agility of a cat he went through the open window. Not until his boots clapped upon the floor did any one become aware of his presence; then all eyes flew to him. Standing there with shoulders hunched, Curt looked straight into Sonora's surprised, snaky eyes, and said in a voice that shook with fury:

"I'm the brother of Mel Rogers, and the pal of Long Tom Neeley. I come here to get you. Will you go with me quietly, or shall I kill you?"

The hard-faced, animal-eyed outlaws gazed in utter astonishment at the lone man who had entered their stronghold; at the man who dared stand there before

the whole gang of them and inform one of their number that he had come to get him.

At first Sonora Keller was perhaps the most surprised man of the lot, and then his lips parted in a sneer. Suddenly he went into blazing action.

He had not straightened up from the bar. He tried to use the same trick against Curt that he had employed against the deputy in Coldwater. His right hand remained upon the crude counter, but his left darted under a side of his vest and flipped a blunt gun from a shoulder holster.

Curt Rogers was not caught off guard as the deputy sheriff had been. As the killer's left shoulder had twitched, the cowboy had flashed his own gun with marvelous rapidity.

As it snapped to a level at his hip it spat out a mouthful of hell. The bullet struck the hidden gun beneath Sonora's vest flap; then tore along the forearm, scooted off and smacked the wall beyond.

Sonora squealed like a wounded wildcat. His gun thumped to the floor. He looked at his bleeding hand and wrist and swore through gritted teeth.

"All right," he gasped the next moment, "I give up! I'll go with you!

"Ugh!" he grimaced, and he pressed the wounded forearm to his stomach and bent slightly. While in that position he snatched his thigh gun—the one with the seven notches—and began shooting.

This time Curt was taken slightly by surprise. The next instant he and Sonora Keller were engaged in one of the fiercest gun duels that even the desperate onlookers ever had seen.

Although Curt had been taken slightly by surprise, since his six-gun had already been drawn and pointed, his first shot rang out in unison with Sonora's. He felt lightning dart across a side of his head; felt a cruel tearing of flesh and a scraping of bone. At the same instant, through a red haze, he saw Sonora flinch.

In his hate to try to shoot first, the killer's aim had not been quite true. A snaky, sidewise move of his body had caused the cowboy's slug to miss the heart.

With guns bang-banging, the two men shot each other down to the floor, all within about three hell-blazing seconds. When it was over Sonora lay sprawled face forward. His big sombrero was crushed and awry. His outflung right hand still held his smoking six-gun.

Curt was on his knees. Gore was streaming down one cheek and a side of his neck. There were two red splotches on his gray shirt. One on the left shoulder, another on the right side. His eyes were a little foggy, and he was weaving slightly.

He thrust himself to his feet, spread his legs, and stood with gun still leveled. Defiantly, he faced the rest of the outlaw band. Perhaps in his semi-daze he did not know that his six-shooter contained only one last cartridge.

Perhaps, again, he did know, but simply figured that he would not have time to fire more than one shot anyway, before a storm of bullets would literally tear him to pieces.

OUTSIDE there were hoofbeats. A man burst through the doorway; then stopped and stared with the rest of the gang. He must have been quick to understand the situation, for the next instant he was blurting:

"The kid must be a heller with his six-gun! When I dashed down there to the gateway to investigate that shootin' we heard, I found both the guards dead! And now this!"

Curt mumbled: "Sonora Keller murdered my brother in cold blood, just for a measly four hundred dollars. Also he shot my best friend; crippling him for life. I swore I'd get the snake."

The tension snapped. A snarl filled the room. Hands went darting for gun butts.

"Hold it!" A tall, broad-shouldered man came striding out of the crowd; a man who was handsome, despite the hardness of his face. There was something in that countenance, something far back in the dark eyes, which suggested that this man had known far better days.

Evidently he was the leader of the human wolf pack, for now the others looked at him in respectful silence. For just a moment the hard, dark eyes stared at the defiantly stanced cowboy, and then a hand went up in an imperious gesture:

"Let him go!"

A murmur of astonishment ran through the room. The tall leader went on in a cold, clipping tone:

"Any lone man with guts enough to

shoot his way into this valley; then enter this dive and gun out one of our number right before our eyes, deserves our respect. There's the door, cowboy—unless you want to stay here and become one of us."

Curt said not a word. He simply headed for the door, walking like a man who had taken slightly too many drinks. At the bar he paused long enough to pick up the bullet-dented silver piece; then he reeled out into the moonlight.

"There goes a *man!*" the tall outlaw boss spoke softly.

CURT ROGERS never knew just how he managed the long, terrible ride back to Coldwater. Part of the time his mind swam in a daze. Part of the time he knew nothing at all. Part of the time he was agonizingly conscious of everything. Now and then he seemed to be floating along through space, while burning, excruciating pains racked his body.

He woke up and found himself in a bed adjoining that of his old pal, Long Tom Neeley. He grinned and asked wearily: "How you comin', podner?"

"Fine. The doc says I ain't as bad hurt as he at first thought. I'll be back on my old job before long." His long face sobered, and he went on:

"I'm sorry to see you all shot up, Curt. You shouldn't have tried it. I told you no man in the world could go up there into that outlaw stronghold an' get one of their number. I'm surprised you got back at all."

"But I did get Sonora Keller," Curt informed him quietly.

For a moment Long Tom stared, and then his eyes narrowed as if he suspected that his friend was sinking back into delirium. "Yeah? Got any way of provin' you did?"

Again Curt grinned, twistedly this time. He felt into a pocket of his vest, which hung on a chair at his bedside. "Yup, this," and he held up a bullet-dented silver dollar.

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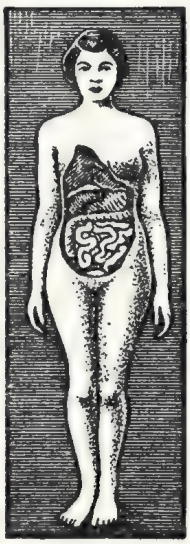

All plates (one foot high) are printed in actual natural colors.

LIST OF PLATES

Plate I.	Nude Adult Female
" II.	Nude Adult Male
" III.	Nervous System of Female
" IV.	Skeletal System
" V.	Muscular System (Posterior)
" VI.	Muscular System (Anterior)
" VII.	Vascular System
" VIII.	Respiratory System
" IX.	Digestive System
" X.	Male Genital Organs in Detail
" XI.	Female Genital Organ in Detail
" XII.	Cross-Section of Pregnant Female Body with Child.

Thus far, plates such as those presented here have been so high in price as to be inaccessible to the public. Our plan in producing these charts is to make them available to every adult person.

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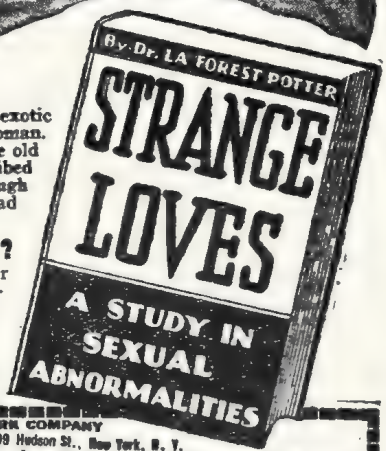

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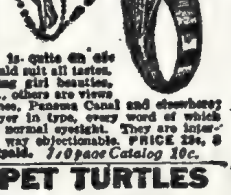

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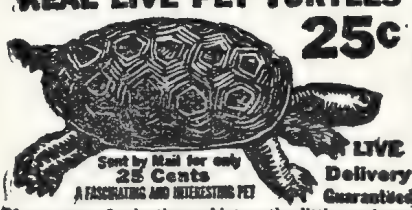

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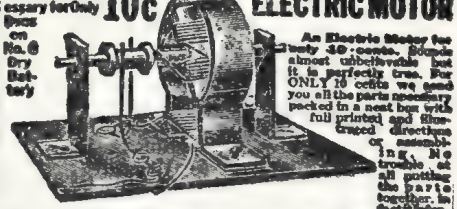

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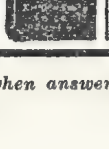

Health Authorities WARN Against BULGING Waistline!

The New York Times

LARGE WAISTLINE HELD HEALTH PERIL

Middle-Aged Man Who Keeps His Small Lives Longer, Government Bureau Says.

FIGURES SHOW DIRECT LINK

Overweight People Have Worst of It in Mortality Tables Covering 15 Causes.

WASHINGTON, Aug. 24 (AP).—The man who keeps his waistline small when he reaches middle age is the most likely to win the race for health, is the conclusion drawn from a new study of the relation of weight to physical defects just published by the Public Health Service

"By the time that middle age is reached, these figures indicate, it is a definite advantage to be under the average weight for height," says the report.

It also shows "a great excess of mortality among overweight persons, whatever the age, and also an excess among young adult underweight persons."

The conclusions are drawn from records of more than 3,000 men from 1909 to 1928, showing the ratio of actual deaths to expected mortality, according to different weight groups. In the following table, figures below 100 indicate less than the expected death rate; those above 100 indicate more than the expected death rate:

Weight Class.	Age Group. 20-29.	30-39.	40-49.	50 and Over.
25 pounds or more underweight—	118	105	83	77
10 to 20 lbs....	101	94	76	85
5 lbs. under to 5 lbs. overweight—	92	84	87	92
10 to 20 pounds overweight ...	99	88	94	90
25 to 45 pounds overweight ...	113	123	125	119
50 lbs. or more overweight ...	163	143	144	130

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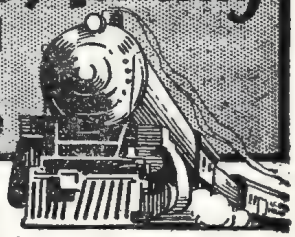

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- ☐ City Mail Carrier
- ☐ Meat Inspector
- ☐ Bookkeeper
- ☐ Customs Inspector
- ☐ U. S. Guards
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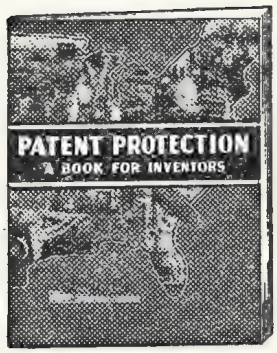

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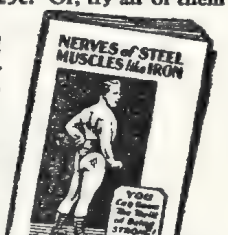

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30x5.00 - 20	2.85	1.05	32x4½	2.25	1.15
28x5.25 - 18	2.90	1.15	33x4½	3.45	1.15
29x5.25 - 19	2.95	1.15	34x4½	3.45	1.15
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